A Christmas Boyfriend
Gay Romance
Trina Solet

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By Trina Solet
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Chapter 1

Coming home from work, Ben had his hands full. He had his laptop bag in one hand and the takeout for dinner in the other. Juggling the bags and his keys, he got through the apartment door. He yelled hi from the welcome mat then went in to find Carly, his kid sister, and Maya at the kitchen table. Carly was helping Maya with her Christmas cards. That project had stretched out for days. Maya was only four so it took her forever to write one card. Some of her cards weren't going to get there before Christmas for sure.

"Hey, guys," Ben said as he kissed them both on top of the head.

"Look, Daddy," Maya said and held up a card with a penguin in a Santa hat. "This one is for Uncle Will. I gave him an extra L by mistake, but Aunt Carly said it's OK."

"You can never have too many L's," Ben told her. "Now you better clear this table. I got us some dinner." Ben held up the takeout bag.

Maya frowned at the bag. "Is it healthy or is it good?"

"It's both," he told her, but his answer was met with skepticism from both Maya and Carly.

As Maya went to put away her writing and drawing supplies, Ben got some plates from the kitchen. "Thanks for picking her up," he said to Carly. She was on her winter break from college so she had time to get Maya. Ben usually did that, but he had a few things that had to be done before the holidays. The extra work kept him late at the office so he was happy that Carly could pitch in. "You're staying for dinner, right?" he asked her.

"I have to. I need to pick your brain about a Christmas gift and I'm running out of time," Carly told him and peered into the takeout bag. She made a face at his kale salad.

"I told you, just get whatever you want for me. It's Maya's gift you need to worry about."

"I already got hers. She's easy. Come on, give me a clue. Otherwise you're getting socks for Christmas," she threatened him.

"Socks are fine," Ben said as he grabbed some forks and handed them to her.

"Ugly, old man socks!" she said while pointing the utensils at him.

"I don't have some kind of secret wish list I'm keeping from you to make your holiday shopping harder," Ben told her. He was getting glasses from the cupboard. Maya had a special set of snowman glasses, and he was relieved to see one was still left. To him, Christmas was all for Maya. There was only one thing he wanted for himself. It wasn't something Carly could get him, but he decided to tell her anyway. "The only thing I'm missing is a man in my life. Can you get me a man for Christmas? At least six feet, perfectly muscled – like a TV ad for a

home gym. Tall, dark and gorgeous. I'll settle for tall, blond and gorgeous, if I absolutely have to. I want him to have an awesome job, awesome car, and enough money to swim in," Ben said as he set out the glasses for Carly to fill.

"Socks it is," Carly told him as she poured regular iced tea, sugar free green iced tea and juice for the three of them.

Taking his glass of green tea and the juice, Ben turned back to the table to see Maya standing on the other side of the kitchen counter, looking very attentive. He smiled at her and she blinked. As they all sat down to dinner, he never imagined what schemes were brewing in that little, blond head.

*

The closer it got to Christmas, the more Jason dreaded the passing of every day. Thanksgiving had been hard enough. He went to Seattle to visit his sister and her family. His dog, Alfie, and his friends had all done their best to distract him, but Jason was still pretty miserable. Only two months ago, he was sure he was going to be spending the holidays with Troy, all his holidays, maybe forever.

He wasn't sure about that last part, and he never got the chance to figure out if Troy might be the one. He did think that they were both at least considering a future together. It was a hard punch in the gut to find out Troy didn't feel the same way. Things were moving too fast for him. He wasn't ready to get so serious. The two of them split up.

To add to Jason's misery, a week ago he found out through mutual friends that Troy was dating someone – the new weatherman from Channel 4 who drove a Porsche. Great. Awesome. Happy Holidays to him. Next he would hear that they were engaged. Jason hated that Troy replaced him so fast while he was alone at this time of year.

Being a substitute teacher did keep him on his toes. It didn't leave him too much time to mope. He never knew where he would be working or for how long. His main worry was that he wouldn't have enough work to keep him busy through his heartbreak. If he had time on his hands, all he would do was brood over Troy. It was a relief to get the call that told him he would be filling in for a preschool teacher going on maternity leave.

There were seventeen kids in his class and every one of them was an irrepressible ball of energy. He had to find the best way to teach them, to keep them busy, and to keep them from missing their regular teacher. That should leave no time to think about Troy.

After a few days of sticking to the lesson plan, Jason decided to mix it up. He went to a local print shop and got the biggest piece of white cardboard they had. It barely fit through the door. The kids were

wide-eyed with curiosity seeing him lug it in. When he told them his plan for the giant piece of cardboard, they were thrilled.

The tables and chairs had to be pushed back to make room for the cardboard in the middle of the floor. Then the kids crawled all over it drawing the card for Ms Gomez, their regular teacher. Though he had assigned them each their own area to draw on, arguments broke out as they jostled each other and stepped on each other's drawing space. Jason decided to call it organized chaos. He sat at his desk and watched to make sure there was no serious fighting.

Some of the other teachers we're going to visit Ms Gomez. They would have the fun of delivering the card. He could already see their dirty looks for sticking them with a card that size.

It was recess, but the kids didn't want to stop working on the giant card. That's when one little girl stood up. Jason had memorized all their names, and he even had a good sense of their personalities. This little girl could be trouble.

He readied himself as Maya Owens turned and marched up to him. "Hey, Mr. Kenney. I need to know where to get a man for Daddy for Christmas."

OK. There was no way he could be ready for that. It wasn't the kind of request he expected to hear in a million years. For a moment, he only stared at her. "You don't. Get him something else."

"You don't know anything, Mr. Kenney. I wish Ms Gomez was still here." She pouted at him.

"She'll be back," Jason told her. He had noticed that the kids were very fond of their regular teacher. They were always asking about her. That's why he had them make that extremely inconvenient and unwieldy card.

"I know Ms Gomez is coming back after she has her Christmas baby," Maya said. "But I want to get Daddy a man for Christmas. He asked for a man, so I'm gonna get him a man."

"Just get him a tie, Maya."

"Nooooo," she said and shook her head. "Aunt Carly is gonna get socks for Daddy. I'm gonna get him a man."

"Socks are good."

"You don't listen, Mr. Kenney," she complained then one of her friends called her over and she ran off.

At the end of the school day, Jason was a little bit curious about the kind of dad who asked for a man for Christmas. He saw Maya run up to someone, but a lot of parents were there picking up kids and he couldn't get a good look. As he tried to get closer, another kid's mom wanted to say hi. It didn't take long, but he didn't expect that Maya and her dad would still be around. That's when he felt someone

tugging on his sleeve.

He turned to see that Maya was trying to get his attention.

"This is my dad," she told him. She had her dad by the sleeve too.

Jason looked him over. He shouldn't need any help finding a man. Mr. Owens was fairly tall and blond like his daughter. He had a strong profile, and his eyes were blue and smiling. If they were at a party, he was the guy Jason would gravitate to. He had something warm and easy about him. The only reason Jason could resist him now was because he was a father of one of his students.

He offered Jason his hand. "Hi, I'm Ben Owens. Maya said you were substituting for Ms Gomez. It's nice to meet you."

"So you're Maya's dad," Jason smiled knowing that this was the guy who wanted to gift wrap some hunk and set him under the tree.

"She's been giving you a hard time?" Ben said, seeing the funny look in his eyes.

"You could say that, but it's all part of the job," Jason told him.

Later, as Jason walked home, he thought about how nice it must be to have a kid especially around Christmas time. Even a kid who tried to get you a man for Christmas wasn't so bad. Actually he wished someone would do that for him. Being newly single for Christmas wasn't going to be much fun.

The streets and sidewalks were teaming with people, more of them all the time the closer it got to Christmas. Heading in and out of stores, they were loaded down with bags and packages. Jason should be one of them, but he was buying all his gifts online and sending them. He couldn't face the crowds at the stores, and the sight of happy couples shopping together would just drive him crazy.

He didn't need any reminders of what he didn't have. His head was full of what might have been. He had already planned just the right thing to get Troy for Christmas. He imagined giving it to him. He pictured Troy's face as he opened his gift and saw it was the watch he had admired in the store display. None of that was going to happen now.

He just had to make peace with that and power through Christmas then New Year's then Valentine's. Oh hell, no. If he wasn't at least dating someone by Valentine's, he was going to be seriously pissed.

For now he would just suffer through being single. Or maybe he could ask for a man for Christmas like Ben Owens did. That still made him grin. If Ben wasn't a father of one of his students, Jason would have volunteered to strike that gift off his wish list.

Chapter 2

The next day at school, Maya was on the same mission. She was telling her friend, Dahlia, about getting a man as a Christmas gift for her dad.

"What does he want him for?" Dahlia wanted to know.

"For Christmas," Maya said.

"But what for?"

Maya thought about it, then she figured it out. "I know. A boyfriend! Daddy wants a man to be his boyfriend."

"Then you have to get a really good one," Dahlia told her.

Maya agreed. She already had a list of requirements. She came over to Jason to tell him all about it and try to get his help again.

"Sixty tall, on the TV, dark and blond, and awesome and with a job, awesome car, and money for swimming," she rattled off.

"OK, some of that almost makes sense, but I still can't help you." Jason didn't exactly like that list, what he could understand of it anyway. And why did that description have to sound so uncomfortably like Troy's new stud? Jason didn't want to hear that yet another guy wanted someone who was nothing like him.

Dahlia came over to join them, and she had a suggestion. "You can give him Mr. Kenney. Mr. Kenney is a man."

Maya looked at Jason skeptically, not sure about his qualifications. "Mr. Kenney, if Daddy wants to make you his boyfriend, do you know how?" Maya asked.

"How? Yes. I've had a little practice," Jason told her. It didn't work out for him so well the last time he was a boyfriend, so maybe he should have said no.

"What about the other stuff?" she wanted to know.

"Other stuff? Like what?"

"Awesome and a car and money for swimming. You have them?"

"I'm not sixty tall," Jason told her. He imagined that must have been six feet. He was six two. He was pretty sure that the whole money and awesome car thing disqualified him, but he decided to stick with something that was easier to explain.

"How much is sixty? This much?" she asked putting up her hand as far as it would reach and standing on her toes.

"A little more than that," Jason told her. He looked over at the height chart that Ms Gomez had made.

"You can wear high heels," Dahlia threw in.

"If Maya's dad wanted someone who wears high heels, he would have mentioned that," he told the girls. "Let's go look at that height chart and see if any of you are all grown up yet."

For the rest of the day, he managed to stay clear of Maya's manhunt. But when he was in front of the school, helping to supervise as the kids were being picked up, he just couldn't help himself. He went over to Ben Owens. Maya was delayed by another little girl who had a new baby sister and was showing her off to everyone.

"Mr. Kenney, nice to see you again," Ben said to him and smiled.

Jason looked at him wryly. That smile was nice, but now he knew what kind of guy Ben was after. "I'm still here. I guess Maya will have to put up with me for a little while longer."

"Put up with you?" Ben asked, looking confused.

"Maya isn't too happy with my performance as a teacher. That's because I still haven't been able to help her line up that man for you for Christmas," Jason explained and watched Ben's face turn red.

That was perfect. Jason had to needle him a little. It wasn't pleasant to hear the qualifications and find out that he didn't fit the bill. He met the height requirement, but in every other way, he wasn't the kind of guy Ben was looking for. It was stupid to take that personally, but he got some satisfaction as he watched him turn red and glare at him with those gorgeous, blue eyes.

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When Maya's teacher first approached him, Ben was happy to see him. He had already guessed that Jason Kenney was gay. He was also good-looking, tall, with amazing dark eyes and a smooth, deep voice. Now all that was ruined and Ben was mortified. He couldn't believe this was happening. Maya must have overheard what he said to Carly.

"She told you she wants to get me a man for Christmas?" Ben asked, stunned.

"She thinks I know where they keep them. She won't let up. Please get a love life, for my sake," Maya's teacher said with a smug look on his face.

"Are you volunteering?" Ben asked archly.

He wanted to put him on the spot, but it didn't work out that way. Mr. Kenney only gave him an "Are you kidding me?" look. Ben gritted his teeth and glared at him.

Further mortified, Ben was glad when Maya dragged him away. For some reason she wanted him to talk to her principal, Mr. Nance.

That evening Carly stopped by the apartment again. Her roommate had a boyfriend and Carly didn't want to stick around for the show they were putting on. She complained to Ben about that while Maya was doing homework in her room and couldn't hear.

"Those two are all over each other. They hog the couch and then

they engage in couch porn." As Carly was helping him make dinner, she turned to him and said, "I know there's no danger of that here."

"Don't take your frustration out on me," Ben told her. "And there could have been couch porn right here and now if Maya had her way. She tried to set me up with her principal." That was a fun moment for both him and Mr. Nance.

Seeing Ben make a face, Carly asked him, "What was wrong with him?"

Ben sighed. He already had this conversation with Maya. She had wanted to know what was wrong with Mr. Nance too.

Ben didn't know how to put it. "He's not my type," he told Maya.

"Type? Type?" she repeated. The word meant nothing to her.

"He's not my kind of guy."

Maya still looked confused. Carly should be able to understand though.

"So you rejected this guy?" she said as she tried to put hot sauce in the couscous with vegetables that Ben was making for dinner.

Ben took the little bottle away from the hot sauce junkie. "He was like sixty."

"Ageist," Carly accused him. "I never knew you were such a shallow guy. What happened to all of the high-minded ideals of your youth?"

"I'm the furthest thing from shallow. And my youth is still very much going on," Ben told her.

"Your list of prerequisites for a guy is the definition of shallow. Tall, rich, gorgeous. I didn't hear anything about kind, smart or socially conscious."

"I was kidding about that list. I just want someone reasonably handsome, not perfect but nice," Ben said then he spotted Maya lurking nearby. "Did she overhear me again?" he asked Carly.

"You have no secrets. She's everywhere and she hears everything," Carly told him.

"How did our parents ever survive having three of us?" Ben wondered.

"Are you kidding? Mom and Dad are mere shells of their former selves. You, me and Will chewed them up and spit them out. They are a mess."

At first Ben wanted to argue, but then he just had to laugh. He could remember plenty of times their parents were at their wit's end over something the three of them did. Overhearing things they weren't supposed to know was the least of it. One Christmas the three of them overturned the Christmas tree. Another year they found their presents early and tried to open them two days before Christmas. Through their whole childhoods, they kept their parents on their toes or right on the edge of insanity.

Maya was a whole different kind of troublemaker. Going to her teacher with her man shopping – Ben was never going to live that down. At least Mr. Kenney was only a substitute. He wouldn't be able to make fun of him about it for long. Ben felt a surprising pang of regret at that thought. Wasn't he supposed to be relieved to see him gone?

Well, Ben didn't exactly hate seeing such a good-looking guy every time he went to pick up Maya from school. Mr. Kenney was a treat for the eyes – tall, with a wiry strength and wavy, brown hair. His eyes were dark brown, kind and gentle one moment and piercing the next.

It was too easy to imagine those eyes looking up at him while that hard, lean body was under him, his long limbs wrapped around him. His own body would be moving in a powerful, hard-driving rhythm above him. Damn. He sent Ben's imagination into overdrive.

He didn't need to use his imagination to picture that same guy rejecting him. Mr. Kenney had scoffed when Ben challenged him to be his man for Christmas. His reaction made Ben want to check himself over in the mirror to try and figure out what was so wrong with him. Maybe he just wasn't Mr. Kenney's type. That didn't mean that Maya's teacher couldn't have a starring role in his fantasies until someone who actually wanted him came along.

While they were finishing up dinner, Carly's roommate texted that she and her boyfriend were going out. Thrilled to have the place to herself, Carly rushed home right after helping Ben clean up the dinner dishes. She was going to miss out on the surprise Ben had for Maya. He had hidden it in his closet. Now he went to get it.

When he came back to the living room, he found Maya waiting excitedly in front of their Christmas tree. She didn't know anything about his surprise yet. She was on pins and needles because the timer was about to turn on the Christmas lights. When the colorful lights came on, Maya jumped and clapped.

The tree had been decorated weeks ago. It stood proudly by the window showing all the signs of being decorated by a four-year-old. Ornaments were hung too low and unevenly spaced out. As long as it sparkled, the tree looked perfect to Maya.

Since they got the tree so early, Ben made sure to water it regularly to make it last as long as possible. Every morning Maya rushed over to it to see if any new gifts had appeared on the red tree skirt. When she found a new gift, she peered at it, trying to figure out what it might be. She wasn't allowed to shake them any more because her gift shaking was a little too enthusiastic.

For a while Ben watched her as she stared at the tree's blinking

lights. He remembered how much he loved Christmas as a kid, but that couldn't compare to the joy he felt sharing the holidays with Maya. Everything that made her happy made him a thousand times happier.

"Maya, look what I got," he said to get her attention. He held up the mini Christmas tree he got for her. It was only a foot tall.

"A little tree?" she said with her eyes shining. She looked over at the big tree maybe wondering if it had spawned this little one somehow.

"It's for your room and these are some mini ornaments you can hang on it." Ben held out the box for her to see. He had picked out some small, unbreakable ornaments in every color.

"I get my own tree," Maya said, jumping with excitement.

She opened the box and exclaimed over every shiny icicle and snowflake. They went to her room, and Ben helped her set up the tree on her nightstand. She hung the decorations with extreme care, but she didn't distribute them very evenly. They were all on the side facing her bed. As long as she liked it, Ben wasn't going to disapprove.

Since it was time for her bedtime routine, Ben sent her to get ready. He waited for her on the living room couch so they could watch one cartoon together before she went to bed. As he rearranged the couch cushions and settled against them, he watched her come in wearing her pajamas. Then she gasped and rushed out of the living room again. She came out of her room carrying her little tree, its lopsided decorations clinking.

"Hey, there. What are you doing with your tree?" Ben asked her.

"I don't want the little tree to be lonely," she said and brought it over.

"OK. Put it on the table," Ben told her.

Setting the tree on the coffee table, Maya climbed on the couch next to him and snuggled up against him. Ben started the cartoon. It was Maya's favorite, Fillipa Flips. When the opening credits song started, Ben told her to sing along quietly. He didn't want her getting hyper right before bed.

It was an episode Maya had seen a few times already. She pretty much knew it by heart. Maya and Ben had been following this same routine for so long, and it was Ben's favorite part of the day. He was tempted to tell Maya, "Don't ever grow up." Or at least he wanted her to promise she would always sit with her dad at the end of the day. Dads were so sappy.

Chapter 3

Jason found out that Ethan, one of the kids in his class, was moving away right after New Year's. That called for a party. Jason brought in some treats and balloons and also got another big piece of cardboard for a card. It wasn't as big as the last one, but it was still impressive.

Now all the kids were making a Hanukkah card for Ethan. Jason wondered how the kid was going to get it home. That was his parents' problem. Jason had drawn the outline of a menorah on the card for the kids to color. They had plenty of room to add their own drawings around it. With Ethan making requests, the card was turning into a Hanukkah dinosaur card.

Ethan was giving instructions to the other kids. Mainly he was asking for dinosaurs that were bigger with bigger teeth. Then there was a spirited discussion about when to put stickers on the card. Even in the midst of this flurry of activity, Maya had time for her mission. She came over to Jason to update him.

"Mr. Kenney, I didn't find a man yet. And Christmas is really soon." She made a sad face.

Jason liked her perseverance but he couldn't really help her. "I told you, get your dad a tie."

She still didn't like that idea. "No. No tie. You aren't helping. You're the teacher. You have to help."

"I think you're confused about what a teacher does." He was pretty sure his job description didn't involve matchmaking or whatever it was that Maya wanted him to do.

"You should be more like Ms Gomez. She's a really good teacher."

"I'll try to be more like Ms Gomez." Jason promised, and he meant it. He wanted to have his students using his name to make other teachers feel bad.

As far as Maya was concerned, there was only one way he could redeem himself. "Help me get a man."

"I could give you my little black book," Jason offered, not that he had one.

"A book? No. Not a book. A man." She then narrowed her eyes and peered at him while tilting her head to one side. "Are you nice, Mr. Kenney?"

"I'd like to think so." Jason said as he wondered what she was up to.

"Are you good-looking?"

Jason tried not to take it personally that she had to ask. "Someone else would have to tell you that."

"Are you more good-looking than Mr. Nance?"

Mr. Nance was the principal and Jason couldn't imagine why she was comparing them. Thinking of the thin, balding man who was a

year or two from retirement, Jason said, "I'd say so. That's a yes."

"Good. Because Daddy said his man had to be handsomer than Mr. Nance."

"Did you try to give Mr. Nance to your dad for Christmas?" Jason asked.

"Aha, but he didn't want him."

Jason smiled. He wished he had been there to see it.

"He won't want me either." Jason predicted.

"If we put a nice bow on you, he might. Daddy said you don't have to be perfect."

"I'm definitely not."

"Daddy won't mind. When I made him a coffee cup, the handle broke off. And then another piece broke off, but Daddy said it was the best cup he ever had. He keeps pens and pencils in it. They fall out a lot."

Jason didn't appreciate being compared to a broken cup. Good thing recess was almost over. His ego couldn't take any further beatings. Once it was time for class, he didn't have to worry about getting roped into being rejected like poor, old Mr. Nance.

Millcreek Preschool had a winter break program of activities that was sort of like day camp. For some working parents, winter break created a daycare crisis. The kids were on a break while the parents were still working. When a teacher who was in the program had a family emergency, a position opened up and Jason jumped at the chance to sign up for the job.

"What do you mean you're working until Christmas? Long breaks are the perks of the teaching profession," his friend, Iris, said to him when she heard that he would be busy.

Jason was sitting on his couch after work. His empty dinner plate was on the coffee table. Alfie was next to him. What would Jason do without him? Come home to an empty apartment, that's what he would do.

Shifting the phone to his other hand so he could pet Alfie, he told Iris the truth. "Free time scares me. The prospect of moping all day, listening to sad music, watching sad movies. No, no, no."

"Alfie wouldn't let you mope."

Looking over at his little dog resting his head on his thigh, Jason smiled. Maybe he wouldn't, but he wasn't taking any chances.

Conversation shifted to the gifts Iris still had to buy, and that reminded Jason that he had to go shopping, but not for a gift. After he was done talking to her, he decided to brave the crowds and go to the mall to get himself a new laptop bag. It was a shopping emergency. His laptop bag was old and one handle came loose that morning.

The mall was just as packed as he feared. His plan to get in and out was turning into a struggle just to reach any store likely to have what he was looking for. Having bought gifts for his niece and nephew already, he was going to go right past the toy store when he spotted Ben and Maya in there. Ben was pushing a whole cartload of toys. Seeing him, Jason stopped and stared. He just had to find out what that was all about.

He went inside and greeted Maya and Ben.

"It's Mr. Kenney," Maya exclaimed. She seemed pleased to see him.

Ben didn't. Instead of a smile, Ben had a cautious look in his blue eyes. Jason wondered how he was going to explain buying so many toys for just one kid.

"Are these all for you?" Jason asked Maya.

"No. That's greedy," she said like he was wrong to even ask that. "They're for the other kids. Some moms and dads don't have lots of money for gifts. And some kids don't even have a dad or a mom, and that's so sad." She got teary eyed as she thought about kids who weren't as lucky as she was.

Ben leaned down, gave her a hug and kissed the top of her head. Then he straightened and turned to Jason. "Our office is doing a toy drive. Tomorrow the truck comes by to pick up the donation box. I want to make sure it's filled to capacity. Maya is helping out. She picks out the gifts because she's a kid and she knows what kids like."

"I guess she's qualified. They already took away the donation box at the school," Jason said.

"They took away ours too. The first one. We're filling up the second one," Ben said smugly.

"OK, now you're just boasting."

Ben admitted it easily. "Yes. I am."

"I'm going to help you out anyway. I'll do my part and pick up a few to add to your pile," Jason decided.

"Now you're talking," Ben told him. "I give the stink-eye to anyone who comes into the office without dropping a toy in our gift donation box. My motto is crack the whip hard enough and you can get anyone to do the right thing."

"How did we get on the subject of a kink like that? Are you coming on to me again?" Jason asked. Maya had stepped away and he was taking advantage of the opportunity. She had gone to check out a toy that made a racket when another kid picked it up.

While keeping an eye on her, Ben looked at him sharply for just a second. "I'm shopping with my kid and minding my own business. You can put away your ego. No one is coming on to you. You're the one who came over to us," Ben reminded him.

"I just wanted to make sure you weren't spoiling that kid of yours.

But now I know you're doing a good deed, and you inspired me to do something good too." He grabbed a random box off the shelf.

Ben stopped him. "Wait," he said then he called Maya to inspect it. "Is this one OK?"

Maya came over and frowned at the Transformer. "It's good."

He picked another toy. This one was a bear in a fancy dress holding a smaller bear also in a fancy dress. Maya smiled and nodded with approval. He added one more, choosing a 3D puzzle with colorful pieces. After Maya nodded again, they all went to the register.

Loaded down with toys in a big bag he carried over his shoulder like some hunky, blond Santa, Ben headed out of the store with Maya at his side. Jason went along with them though he hadn't gotten his laptop bag yet. It could wait. So what if the handle on the one he had was broken. He would just tuck it under his arm.

As they walked by the food court, Maya stopped. A display of striped cupcakes with candy canes stuck into them got her attention. She ran over to the glass case and stared.

Seeing how Maya peered at the cupcakes, Jason asked Ben, "Aren't you going to get one for her?"

"What happened to not spoiling her?" Ben asked him and hefted his big bag of toys from one shoulder to the other. If he put on a Santa suit, Jason would develop a Santa fetish so fast. For now he shifted his focus back to Maya as she smudged the glass that separated her from those cupcakes.

"But she's looking at them like she's going to eat them with her eyes," Jason pointed out.

"It's a thousand calories worth of sugar and fat in each one," Ben told him.

Jason shook his head as Maya looked up at her dad with pleading eyes. "How can you say no to that face? You're inhuman," Jason said, dismayed by Ben's heartlessness.

"Who's the strict one now? Who's the tough guy?" Ben taunted him.

Jason rolled his eyes as they all headed out together. A blast of cold air hit them as they stepped outside. Despite the cold, Jason walked them through the mall parking lot. Like everyone else they couldn't find a decent parking space. Their car was miles away from the entrance. Along the way he and Ben talked about the winter break program.

Jason was in charge of some of the same kids he had in his class before and some new ones. Maya was signed up for it too so Jason knew he would be hearing about her manhunt again. In a self-defense move, he planned to keep her and all the other kids pretty busy.

"They are going to be making a mountain of paper snowflakes," he

told Ben. "And I made up a winter hibernation game for them to play."

"So basically nap time," Ben said.

"I call it lying down quietly time. And they'll be learning some winter songs to sing at the top of their lungs. That's to punish the parents," Jason said and eyed Ben meanly.

Ben only smirked. "You have more fun with this than you want to admit, don't you?"

"It's just a job," Jason claimed.

"I heard about those giant cards you had the kids make," Ben told him.

Jason laughed. "Yeah, the fun is in giving those, not receiving them."

"I don't know about that. I bet Ms Gomez loved it."

"The kids certainly love her."

Ben noticed his attitude when he said that. "You're jealous, aren't you?"

"These days I'm jealous of everyone and everything," Jason grumbled.

Ben raised an eyebrow at him, but they had arrived at his car. Jason was glad he didn't get a chance to ask him what he meant. He handed Ben the toys he bought.

"Thanks. Three more kids are going to be happy for the holidays," Ben told him. The smile he gave Jason almost made him forget that he wasn't his type of guy.

Once they drove away, Jason realized he was an idiot and went back in to finish shopping so he wouldn't have to come back here again. With Christmas so soon, he didn't dare risk another trip to the mall. He couldn't believe he let Ben distract him like that. Stopping in the middle of the freezing parking lot, thinking of Ben's smile, he was ready to get distracted all over again.

Chapter 4

It was Christmas Eve and the kids' excitement had reached a fever pitch. They were so hyperactive that Jason decided to teach them a New Year's dance. For most of the kids, dancing equaled jumping and kicking. After that it was quite a trick to get them to calm down. At the end of the day, as he was telling the kids to put on their jackets and hats, Jason noticed that Maya looked a little down. When he called her over to his desk, she brightened up immediately.

She came over already wearing her puffy, pink jacket and baby blue, knit cap. "Mr. Kenney, you're going to be Daddy's present," she told him.

"We talked about this. I wouldn't be any good as a present," Jason told her.

At his words, she looked close to tears. "But you're the only man I can get."

"Your dad will like anything you get him, a drawing or a card. As long as it's from you, he'll like it. I promise. You can give him a drawing of a man. How's that?"

Jason watched her face crumple and she shook her head. "I love Daddy so much." Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Hey. Don't be sad," he told her. He took a deep breath and bit the bullet. "OK. You can put a bow on me and give me to your dad."

"I have a bow!" she said, getting excited. She went to her desk and brought back a pre-made, red bow, the self-stick kind.

"You can stick it right on my head," Jason offered and leaned down.

"I'll stick it on your nose," Maya decided.

"That too. Anything you want," he said. It was too late to pretend he hadn't been beaten. Lucky for him, the bow wouldn't stay on his nose so it went on top of his head. That was a sort of victory.

"That looks good," Maya declared. "Daddy will like you even if you're no good at being a teacher."

"I'm doing this for you, and you still don't think I'm a good teacher?" Jason asked.

"You don't have to be a good teacher. Just try and be a good present for Daddy," Maya instructed then she took him by the hand and led him outside.

*

The winter break program was a big help to Ben. Though Carly was a good sport about looking after Maya, she had her own life. Plus Maya was at that age when kids love school. She didn't mind some extra days of classes.

Getting to see Jason was kind of a perk for Ben. He looked for Maya first then raised his eyes to scan a few feet higher for her teacher. Today he saw something different.

Ben didn't know what was happening, but Maya was leading her teacher by the hand. As they got closer, he could see that a red gift bow was stuck in his hair.

"Don't tell me," he said to Jason.

"She was this close to crying."

"Me? No! I wasn't gonna cry," Maya claimed while looking from Jason to Ben.

"Then I can take this bow off?" Jason reached for the bow and Maya panicked.

"Nooo. You're Daddy's present." She stared up at him, imploring him with her eyes.

Jason had already proved he had no defenses against her pleading look, so the bow stayed on.

"Is he good?" Maya asked Ben, while holding Jason's hand.

"Sure. He's great. Thank you, sweetie," Ben said to her. She was so happy to hear that. He got down and gave her a big hug. When he turned to Jason, Ben saw him looking at the two of them and smiling. "Thanks for doing this," Ben said to him.

"My pleasure. Kind of." Jason gave him a wicked grin. "Now I've done my good deed. It was nice being your Christmas present, but I better go and..."

Before he could finish, Maya protested. "No. You have to come home with us. I want to put you under the tree."

Jason just stared at her. Around them the crowd of kids and parents was thinning out. It would be reasonable to let Jason off the hook right about now, but Maya was making all these crazy plans for the poor guy.

"He won't fit," Ben pointed out though he couldn't help picturing him sitting under the tree with that bow in his hair.

"He has to," Maya insisted.

"I can't. Sorry. I have to go home and feed my dog," Jason said.

"I want to see the dog. We'll come with you and help you feed the dog," Maya declared.

Ben wanted to tell Maya not to invite herself but instead he asked Jason, "Is there a dog?" Ben thought he might be making that up as an excuse to get away.

"I wouldn't make up a dog," Jason told him.

"Can we go?" she said, turning from Jason to Ben.

"Now you ask," Ben said.

"You can stop by if you want," Jason said. "It's not far from here."

"If you don't mind," Ben said.

Before they set off for Jason's apartment, Ben reached up and took the red bow from his hair.

"Ouch," Jason complained when the sticky part pulled his hair. He was so undignified but a good sport to go along with Maya like that. Ben kind of wanted to take him home and stick him under the tree too.

Chapter 5

By the time they had walked the few blocks to Jason's apartment building, Maya had asked him a million questions about his dog.

"What does he eat?"

"Is he funny?"

"Can I take him home with me?"

As she said that, Jason looked at Ben helplessly.

"If you don't toughen up, she's going to have your dog," Ben warned him with a laugh.

They went up to the fifth floor and into a modest, one bedroom apartment. It was decorated simply and stuffed full of books. But the star attraction of the place was a little floppy eared, black and white mutt. Maya squealed when she saw him. The dog rushed up to greet Jason, but then Maya started fussing over him, and he was all hers. She was so taken with him, she didn't even take off her knit cap or puffy jacket at first. Watching her, Ben wasn't sure how he was going to separate her from that dog.

"That's Alfie," Jason told her.

Not satisfied with a one-sided introduction, Maya told the dog, "I'm Maya."

"Alfred?" Ben guessed as Maya handed him her jacket and cap.

"Alfonso, my first crush," Jason told him. "When I was in second grade, I slipped on a patch of ice and fell on my face. I bit my tongue and started to cry. Alfonso was the smallest, quietest, nerdiest kid in our class. He was so shy you could hardly tell he was there. As I was sitting on the ground, crying, he came over and put his glasses on me. I was so surprised and confused, I stopped crying."

"He sounds like a stud," Ben said to him.

"In his own way, he was. Alfie was shy too when I first got him. But you can't be sad with a funny, little guy like that around," Jason said and looked down at the dog fondly.

Ben wondered what he had to be sad about, but he didn't want to pry. They both watched Maya and the dog. She was sitting on the floor, hugging the dog when she looked up at Ben and said very solemnly, "I love him."

"You can't love him already. You just met that dog," Ben told her, but she couldn't be reasoned with.

"I love him," she repeated.

"Is this something that runs in the family?" Jason asked and raised an eyebrow at Ben.

"No." Ben glared at him. "You have nothing to worry about."

Jason laughed. "Actually, right now I wouldn't mind a guy who wanted to latch on to me and never let go."

To Ben that sounded kind of scary and extreme. Seeing his look, Jason told him. "That only sounds good to a guy who's just been dumped."

"Is that why you were sad?"

Jason shrugged and they went back to watching Maya and Alfie becoming the best of friends in a matter of minutes.

As she played with the dog, Maya noticed that he was wearing a red bandana with Christmas trees and candy canes.

"Is he a Christmas dog?" she asked Jason.

"That's just something the dog groomer put on him," Jason told her, but she kept looking up at him eagerly. He had no choice but to tell her what she wanted to hear. "Yes. He is a Christmas dog," Jason told her, and he didn't even know what she meant by that.

Shaking his head while Ben laughed at him, he went into the kitchen. Two dog bowls were in the corner. Jason took care of the water first then got out a bag of dog food.

"His food isn't nice and it's stinky," Maya said as Jason filled the other dog bowl. She looked at him like it was his fault.

"That's what dogs like," Jason told her. He pointed at Alfie, who was happily munching down.

She watched Alfie as he ate, but she didn't look convinced.

"She probably wants to feed him a cupcake. I don't know how you do it. I picture a classroom full of Mayas and I want to faint," Ben admitted.

"None of them are Maya. If there was more than one of her, I would spend all day hiding under a desk," Jason said.

"Hey!" Ben said.

"I mean that in the best possible way. But she did put a gift bow on me and hand me over to a perfect stranger to do as he wants with me," Jason said. He had an accusing look in his eyes, but what he said was giving Ben all sorts of ideas.

"Do as I want with you. I didn't realize. Anything I want? I know. I'll take you to my aunt's for Christmas Eve dinner," Ben said.

"You depraved, sick man."

With Maya there, Alfie didn't eat much before he went back to playing with her. He would stop by to try to recruit Jason then run off with his new friend. Having scampered around with Alfie, Maya came back to the two of them.

"Where's your tree?" she asked Jason.

He pointed to a tiny tree even smaller than the one Ben had given Maya. It was sitting high up on a shelf next to some books.

"It’s up there so Alfie can't get to it," Jason explained.

Maya was too small to see it, so Ben picked her up for a better look. She peered at the sorry-looking tree with its faded, little ornaments. She then turned to Jason and gave him a wounded look.

"The dog is good, but the tree is no good," Maya said as Ben put her down. She shook her head in disapproval.

"It's my tree from college. It's a thrift store find," Jason said in the tree's defense, but that didn't win him any points with Maya.

"We've established that this place isn't exactly decked out for the holidays, so where are you spending Christmas?" Ben asked him as Maya went to watch Alfie eat some more.

"One of my friends quit law school a year ago to go to cooking school. Tomorrow she'll be showing off her skill. Expectations are high. As for tonight, some friends are having a Christmas Eve get-together." He rolled his eyes.

"That sounds nice," Ben said and wondered what the problem was.

"It would, but I just found out my ex is going to be there with his new boyfriend." Jason clenched his jaw and glowered. In the process, he managed to look extra sexy. Then he ruined it. "I'm still going though, just to show him he can't intimidate me by being happy."

"That's a good way to spend Christmas."

"I don't care if my Christmas Eve is ruined. I'm not backing down," Jason said.

"That's the spirit. Not the spirit of the season. The spirit of pig-headedness, I guess."

"I'm supposed to sit home alone on Christmas Eve while he laughs it up with his new boy toy?" Jason asked.

Running back into the living room with Alfie, Maya overheard him. "Alone? No. You're coming home with us," she told him.

"We're going to Aunt Lois's," Ben reminded her.

"Mr. Kenney can come too," Maya said. She was so ready to take charge of Jason's life.

"He already has plans, sweetie," Ben told her. "He's going to a party with his friends."

Maya wasn't allowing that. "He can't. He's your present."

"And he's a very nice present. Thank you. But he has a life of his own." Ben looked over at Jason and amended that. "Sort of."

"Hey!" Jason protested, but he didn't have a leg to stand on.

"You promised," she said, turning her sad eyes at Jason.

"I said you could give me to your dad, not that I would go home with you."

She looked ready to cry again, and Jason looked at Ben for help. He had no resistance to her at all. No wonder he ended up with a gift bow on his head.

Ben took pity on him and told Maya, "Sweetie, Jason was being nice. Now you need to be nice too. Say thank you, and let him go have fun, or whatever, with his friends."

"Fine. Thank you," she said grumpily.

Jason sighed.

"Sorry," Ben said, seeing that Maya wasn't being very gracious.

"I appreciate the effort," Jason told him. "I just hate to see her upset."

"You can always go along with her until we're married," Ben said to needle him, but Jason took him up on it.

"I would. Too bad I'm not your type," Jason said.

"What do you mean?"

"Maya told me your criteria. Preschool teacher of slightly above average height wasn't on the list."

"Why is everyone on me about that list? I was kidding. But I'm sure your ideal guy drives a hybrid and has a kid."

"Pretty much," Jason said and grinned at him devilishly.

"That's a bluff if I ever heard one."

"I don't bluff," Jason claimed.

"Then you're coming to dinner with us to Aunt Lois's," Ben decided.

"What?" Jason said like he didn't know how his game of chicken got him ensnared like this.

Maya was thrilled. "Yey, yey, yey! Put the bow back on," she demanded.

"What is happening?" Jason asked.

"Christmas Eve dinner is happening," Ben told him. "Aunt Lois is on the Italian side of our family so she has a big fish dinner on Christmas Eve."

"Fish," Jason said, making a face.

"There's other stuff too. With the spread she puts on, you won't go hungry, believe me."

"There isn't going to be seven kinds of fish, is there?" Jason asked worriedly. He sounded like he had a fish phobia.

"No, only a few," Ben told him. "Be ready to go..."

Jason interrupted him. "What about Alfie? He'll be home alone," he said, trying to save himself.

"No," Maya protested and hugged Alfie.

Ben didn't want to see the little guy left all alone either. "Bring him along. Aunt Lois has two dogs of her own. She never minds doggy visitors."

"OK. Maybe Alfie would be welcome, but I would feel out of place," Jason said, still trying to get out of it.

Knowing how it was going to be at his aunt's house, Ben assured him, "I guarantee you that you won't. There are always so many people there. I swear she just drags people in off the street."

Jason looked from him to Maya like she might have an answer to what was happening and how he might get himself out of it, but she just looked excited and happy.

"Pull yourself together," Ben said to him. "It's a long drive so we'll be back to pick you up in one hour. And wear something nice. I want everyone to be jealous. I want my cousins to drool."

"Um. I guess I know where Maya gets it," Jason said and looked from pushy father to pushy daughter.

"Yes, you do. Be ready to go," Ben told him and collected Maya. To get her to come along, he had to assure her she would be seeing Alfie very soon.

Chapter 6

On the long car ride to Aunt Lois's, Maya didn't need any other entertainment as long as she had Alfie in the back seat with her. Evergreens lined the road. Maya pointed them out to Alfie and called them Christmas trees. Ben was a little worried about how attached she was getting to that sweet little dog.

Getting off the highway, they reached a neighborhood of ranch style houses. Aunt Lois's house was easy to spot. It was the one with a lawn that had been turned into a parking lot.

It was still early in the evening, but the house was all lit up inside and out. Maya clapped seeing it as they parked on the lawn. Lights were strung everywhere where they could possibly be strung along the roof line, on every bush and tree, along the path and around a small fountain.

Once they were out of the car, Maya and Alfie ran all around the yard. Through the living room windows, they could see the big Christmas tree inside. Having seen them arrive, Aunt Lois opened the door before they could ring the doorbell. As soon as she caught sight of her, Maya squealed and launched herself into a hug. The next to get Aunt Lois's attention was Alfie.

"Sweetie, did you get a dog?" she asked.

Maya said yes immediately.

"I'm never getting my dog back, am I?" Jason mumbled, standing next to Ben as they were both ignored while Aunt Lois got acquainted with Alfie.

Ben didn't mind hanging back with Jason who was standing close to him. In the chilly air of the evening, Ben could feel the heat of his body. He had to resist the urge to put an arm around him or grab hold of his hand. He knew he shouldn't do that, but it also seemed wrong not to. Standing with Jason under the Christmas lights, he felt the rightness of the moment, like something he had been dreaming about was finally happening.

But nothing was happening. He and Jason were just waiting for Aunt Lois to notice them.

"You came too," Aunt Lois said and hugged Ben.

"Yes. I came with Maya. This is Jason. He is the dog's plus one," Ben told her.

"I know better," she said. When she set her eyes on Jason, Aunt Lois's whole face lit up. "This is him. Jason, Maya's teacher, and your date. My God, you two look good together," she said. She was obviously delighted by what she saw. Sweeping back her strawberry blond curls, she beamed at Jason and Ben.

Ben could clearly remember phoning her only a few hours ago and telling her that he was bringing Jason to dinner but just as a friend, not as his date. His disclaimer didn't seem to have made any kind of impression on her. Aunt Lois was ready to welcome Jason into her house and into the family.

As they went in, they could see that the house was already bursting at the seams, but Aunt Lois could always find room and a plate for one more. That's just how she was. Now she took Alfie over to meet her dogs.

Alfie and the two poodles sniffed at each other while Maya and another little girl yelled "Eww, eww." The dogs didn't take any notice of their disapproval while they made friends in their own way.

Ben's cousins came over with their husbands to meet Jason. Just like their mother, Marie and Rita also liked what they saw.

"I didn't know preschool teachers could be so sexy," Marie said. Then she turned to her husband. "What do you do again?"

"I'm a firefighter, honey."

"That's good too," she said.

Ben introduced Jason to a few other people, those he knew anyway. There were always plenty of new faces at Aunt Lois's dinner parties.

Once he was done, he told Jason, "At this point, we're even. You know everyone I know."

"Who's missing? I remember Maya mentioned her aunt," Jason said.

"That's my sister, Carly. She had a party to go to. Our brother, Will, is at his in-law's. And our parents went on a winter cruise," Ben told him.

"Your mom just wanted to get out of cooking," Aunt Lois said. She had sneaked up on them so she could show them to the buffet table where the finger foods and desserts were laid out.

"She started cooking yesterday," Ben told him as they both stared at the impressive amount of food. "She made a whole mountain of snowball cookies," he said when Maya came to join them. "Maya will eat all of those by herself."

Maya nodded, agreeing with that plan. Ben didn't let her have any yet. Dinner was going to be served soon so they just had a few things to munch on and some wine.

Everything at his aunt's was familiar to him but never the same. The ever changing décor and the new faces on the guest list were what he was used to. There was only one big difference tonight, and that was Jason. He was next to him and now the lights glittered more brightly. The shadows suddenly seemed inviting. The dark bedroom doorways told him, "You can be alone with him in here."

The hum of conversation and the spikes of exclamations and laughter came to him from far away. It was like he was drunk, but he

had barely had two sips of his wine. He felt like he and Jason were in their own bubble with Maya flitting in and out at will. Ben's eyes kept returning to Jason's face, to his lips and his eyes. If they were alone, he would have already kissed him.

But they weren't alone and soon they were all called to dinner. At the head of the table, Aunt Lois looked radiant. She was really in her element when she was playing the hostess. The long table was actually two tables that were pushed together. They didn't meet perfectly so there was an awkward area in the middle.

There was so much food that it wouldn't fit in the center of the two tables. The rest of the serving platters and bowls were on the sideboard. People reached back for them and passed them around. Aunt Lois's roasted sweet potatoes were a big favorite as was her rice with dried fruits and nuts.

"It's my Christmas specialty," she boasted of the rice dish.

"And it's also in every single Christmas cookbook," one of her friends said.

"They all stole the idea from me," Aunt Lois claimed.

There were also assorted green vegetables, crab cakes and shrimp pasta. The centerpiece was a pretty looking baked fish with a butter wine sauce, lemon slices and fennel. Jason wouldn't even touch it.

Noticing what was on Jason's plate and all the things he had passed up, Maya lectured him, "You can't just eat sweet potatoes. You have to have veggies and fish too."

"But I like sweet potatoes, and I don't like fish," Jason told her peevishly.

"Daddy," she complained to Ben.

"Are you defying her?" Ben asked.

"I'm a professional educator. I can't let a four-year-old boss me around," Jason claimed.

Ben eyed him sideways. "Really? Look where you are and with whom. It's too late for your false bravado."

Jason looked over at Maya, but she had already turned her attention to Alfie and the other two dogs. "She might have won this one, but next time I'll train, I'll bulk up. I'll be ready."

Ben gaze ran over Jason's broad chest. His eyes lingered on the tight muscles that stretched his shirt when he moved. He couldn't be sure without seeing him naked, but Jason didn't need to do one thing to get in shape. All Ben saw was hard muscled perfection, not too much bulk, just enough to grab onto while he was being slammed right through the mattress. Oh yeah, those were wholesome and appropriate thoughts to be having in the middle of a family Christmas dinner. He better rein it in especially since this wasn't actually a date.

"How are you a teacher exactly if you can't hold your own against a little kid?" Ben asked to get his mind off Jason's body and how it might fit against his own.

Jason shook his head. "That would take some kind of superhuman ability. I'm only a human teacher." He then looked at Ben oddly. He leaned in and whispered, "Plus I'm a sucker for a pair of sweet, baby blues."

Ben stared at him and Jason winked. The bastard was teasing him. Ben already knew that his baby blues had no power over him. Or he thought he knew. With Jason so near, his head was cloudy and his body always on the verge of betraying him. He hurriedly took a sip of wine and told himself to get a damn grip.

After dinner, Aunt Lois was showing a video of her trip to Alaska with her ex. She kept covering him up with her hands while saying, "Don't look at him. No one look at him." Good thing he was behind the camera most of the time.

Maya was playing with the dogs and that other little girl. With so many people there, Ben still didn't know whose kid she was. Maybe a neighbor's?

Finding a seat wherever they could, everyone there had a drink in hand and they were all telling stories and laughing. The stories were mostly about stuff Aunt Lois got up to over the years. They didn't always make sense to someone who didn't know her or her friends and family.

"You're not bored, are you?" Ben asked Jason. If he was having a bad time, Ben was ready to take full responsibility and to feel guilty for dragging him here.

"Not even a little," Jason said with a smile.

That was nice to hear, and the smile on Jason's face was warm and infectious. The two of them saw a place open up on one end of the sofa. A few people had left after dinner, but the house was still packed so they had no choice but to cuddle up against each other. They were saving tons of space and keeping each other warm too.

Chapter 7

Cuddling with Ben on the couch was unexpected and nice, but it came to an end. Somebody put on some music, and the two of them were forced to get up and help move furniture. Then they just stood back and watched.

As a big enough space was cleared, people started to dance. Ben's aunt danced with an older man then with Maya and the other little girl. The more people had to drink, the more of them joined her on the dance floor.

Jason turned to Ben, "Are you thinking about asking me to dance?"

"Don't flatter yourself," Ben told him. Then he looked at Jason sideways. "Why? Did you want to dance?"

Jason laughed. He kind of did want to, but he just wasn't that brave.

Taking a break from dancing, Maya came over to them.

"Did you see me, Daddy?"

"You looked great out there," Ben told her. He picked her up and swung her around in a circle.

"Looks like your Aunt Lois is out for the count," Jason said as he saw her drop into a chair. She fanned herself with a paper coaster and laughed.

"That's tipsy," Maya told him. "Daddy isn't allowed to be tipsy because he sings and it's bad." Maya looked at her dad sternly then turned her attention back on Jason. "Dance with Daddy, Mr. Kenney," Maya said while trying to pull both of them to the dance floor.

"I'm more of a singer like your dad, and I like to throw in some air guitar," he told her. "And you can call me Jason."

"Jason?"

"That's my name."

"No." She shook her head. "You're Mr. Kenney."

"I'm Mr. Kenney at school. When I'm not at school, I'm just Jason."

Maya still look skeptical so Ben took a shot at explaining his dual identity to her. "You know how people at work call me Mr. Owens?"

"No," Maya told him flatly.

"Well, they do. Some of them anyway," Ben said. "Now that he's my Christmas gift, you can call him Jason."

Once that issue was settled, Maya was again trying to get them to dance. She got them to the dance floor just in time for a slow song. Jason looked at Ben, wondering if he was going to chicken out. He stepped closer to Jason and put his arms around him.

"Just so you know I can't dance," Jason warned him.

"That shouldn't be a problem." Ben looked around. "We can move two inches that way or two inches this way. No one's dancing skills are coming into play here."

That wasn't a bad thing at all. Jason got to hold Ben close while they swayed to the slow rhythm of the music. So far this was his favorite moment of the night. Ben was pressed against him and sometimes looking into his eyes with a challenging stare that turned hot as he held it too long. Jason wished he could pull him away from here, take him somewhere dark and intimate.

He was so lost in Ben, he didn't even notice that the crowd around them was dispersing. There was more room to dance, but they felt more visible too. Feeling self-conscious, the two of them stepped away from each other.

"Things are winding down," Jason said.

Ben's aunt was walking some of her guests to the door, handing them Tupperware containers and foil wrapped plates as well as their coats and scarves. Maya ran off to say goodbye to that other little girl who was leaving along with a number of other people. Not everyone was on their way out though. The furniture was moved back and people were sitting down again.

Jason wondered when Ben was planning on starting for home. He showed no signs of leaving though. In fact, Ben got comfortable on the couch like he was settling in. Before Jason could ask him about leaving, Ben started texting with his sister.

He gave Jason a play by play. "She says I don't need to check up on her. She's not a teenager. For the record, she's nineteen. She's so drunk. Now she says she's not drunk. She says I'm drunk. I'm not drunk."

A little later Maya reappeared wearing pajamas with cute little elves on them – elves running with arms full of presents, elves riding in sleighs, elves dancing around a Christmas tree. She was showing off her pajamas to everyone. Jason figured they must be new. Maybe she was only trying them on.

Just to make sure, he asked Ben, "Why is Maya in pajamas?"

"She's getting ready for bed," Ben said.

Jason turned to stare at him. "Are you guys staying over?"

"We are, and you are too since we are your ride."

Jason couldn't believe this was the first he was hearing about this. "You didn't tell me this was a sleepover," he said accusingly. "You wily bastard. You kidnapped me."

"And your little dog too. It's too late to drive back, and I'm not sure how many glasses of wine I've had," Ben said defensively.

"Just how you planned it. You think you can get the better of me now that I'm stuffed full of sweet potatoes and red wine," Jason said and dropped down next to him on the couch.

"What are you talking about? Like I can make a move on you in the

middle of all this." Ben gestured all around at the other guests who looked ready to stay the night.

"I wouldn't put anything past you," Jason said. "Are all these people sleeping over? Where is your aunt going to put them all?"

"They'll sleep wherever they drop, I guess," Ben said. A good number of guests had drinks in their hands, mostly wine glasses. Though no one was really drunk, they did look very content to stay where they were.

Maya came over to say goodnight and surprised Jason by giving him a hug. "You did a good job," she told him.

"I did?"

"Yes. You did a good job being Daddy's present." She gave Jason a big smile and scampered off to bed or to the loveseat actually. That's where she was sleeping. It was plenty big for her. Ben's cousins were visiting from out of town. They had the guest rooms.

Maya curled up on the love seat, and Ben sat down next to her. Ben's aunt must have decided it was Alfie's bedtime too. She brought an extra dog bed for him. Picking a place close to the loveseat, Jason set up the dog bed.

"Alfie can sleep with me," Maya said.

"He has the doggy bed and this big towel. He's OK on the floor," Jason told her.

"I want to sleep on the floor," Maya said eagerly.

Jason laughed. "How about if I put the dog bed right next to you, here?" He moved it close to the loveseat and watched Alfie settle into it. Maya was happy with that arrangement. With Ben sitting next to her, smoothing back her hair, she fell asleep fast.

As the night wore on, the crowd thinned out some more. The conversation dropped down to a low murmur. Left on their own, Jason and Ben sat on the sofa across from Maya's loveseat.

"This sofa doesn't fold out," Ben told him. "If one of us takes it for sleeping, the other one will have to sleep on the floor." Ben paused and looked at Jason in the most seductive way he could imagine. "Or we can share it."

"So this is when you pounce." Jason shook his head.

"I mean we can both just sit here," Ben said.

"OK. I'll sit up with you all night," Jason told him. At that moment, he couldn't imagine anything better.

With the other guests dozing or preoccupied with each other, it was almost like they were alone. Jason moved closer and put his arm around Ben. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched him smile.

"Who's making a move now?" Ben whispered.

"I guess I am," Jason admitted.

He could feel Ben relax against him. A little while later his breathing became deep and even. Ben had fallen asleep with his head on Jason's shoulder. So much for staying up all night.

Jason opened his eyes to the sound of Ben snoring softly against his chest. They had turned slightly during the night, made themselves more comfortable and more intimate. Jason was lying sideways on the couch with Ben's leg thrown over his. Both of Jason's arms were wrapped around Ben, and he didn't want to move.

It was early. Everyone else was still sleeping or gone. Seeing Maya and Alfie playing on the floor next to the loveseat, Jason realized they were the ones who had woken him up. If it wasn't for Maya, Alfie would have been climbing all over him by now.

Noticing that he was awake, Maya came over and Alfie trailed after her.

"Daddy is still sleeping?" she asked.

At the sound of her voice, Ben woke up immediately. He looked a little disoriented and sexily disheveled. He stared at Jason for a minute or two then he turned his eyes to Maya.

"Marry Christmas," Maya told him and giggled.

Ben disentangled himself from Jason and got up to give her a hug. It was kind of a weird Christmas morning. A few other people were getting up too, getting ready to leave.

After Jason came back from the bathroom, Ben updated him on the situation. "The cousins and Aunt Lois are still asleep. Her kitchen is an unholy mess. No breakfast can be expected to come out of there. And her dogs need to be walked," he summed up.

While Jason walked Alfie and the other two dogs, Ben washed some pots and pans. Jason came back just in time to help him dry and have some of the coffee he made after digging up the coffee maker. Ben found some cereal and milk for Maya.

Watching the dogs lap up their water, Maya announced, "I want to do that. I want to lick my cereal."

"No," Ben said, stopping her before she dunked her face into her cereal bowl.

They all walked Alfie one more time before the long ride home, then got into Ben's car and waved goodbye to Aunt Lois. Wearing a coat over her robe and nightgown, she waved back from her porch.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Ben said as they drove away.

"No. It was great. Thanks for bringing me," Jason said. It was definitely better than the evening of misery and seething jealousy he

had planned for himself. He just wished he knew where he stood with Ben now. Jason wanted to see him again. Sitting next to him in the car, he had a desperate need to kiss Ben. The thought that he might never get the chance made him miserable. During their whole ride, he couldn't get up the courage to ask him out.

Once they arrived in front of his building, Jason knew it was time. He needed to find out if Ben wanted to see him again, but he was afraid to. Still a little raw from being dumped by Troy, Jason was low on self-confidence. The time he spent with Ben made him feel like they had something, but what if that was all one-sided?

When Jason stepped out of the car, Ben got out too. Jason scooped up Alfie from the back seat while Ben consoled Maya and told her Alfie had to go home.

"And Jason too?" Maya asked, using his first name for the first time.

"Him too."

"No," Maya protested. "He has to come home with us to sit under the tree."

Ben just stared at her for a second like he was wondering if she was serious. "He has his own presents to open. And I bet he has some for Alfie too."

"I do," Jason confirmed.

"Alfie," Maya called out to him mournfully as she looked up at him in Jason's arms.

Ben closed the door so the car would stay warm. He and Jason stood on the sidewalk. Jason stroked Alfie's back and drew on all the courage he had. After Troy, he didn't have too much of it, just enough for one question. He really didn't want to hear a no. That's why he didn't ask Ben a yes or no question.

Instead he leaned in and said, "When can I see you again?" His voice was low. His throat constricted because of nerves and straight out fear. He was surprised he could even get any words out.

For a moment Ben only looked at him and Jason was afraid he was about to be let down easy.

"I can't tell you how much I like to hear those words at the end of a date," Ben told him.

Jason felt such relief at his words. "Date, huh. I didn't realize." His heart was pounding so hard now. He wondered if it had stopped beating while he held his breath waiting for Ben's answer. "So give me a time and place, and I'll be there."

"I'll get Carly to babysit, and we can go out for dinner tomorrow night. Soon enough?"

"Perfect. You're full of good news," Jason told him.

He moved in closer just as Ben did the same. Ben's hand gripped his arm. They leaned in slowly, aligned their mouths and let their lips touch then open. Jason's eyes fell closed. He felt the pressure of Ben's mouth like a wave that passed all through him. His whole body surged toward Ben.

Alfie was between them and he shifted slightly, bringing him out of it. Jason moaned savoring the kiss until the very end. As Ben broke the kiss, he placed his hand over Jason's where it rested on Alfie's back. Ben scratched Alfie's little head while looking into Jason's eyes.

"Best date of my life," Jason told him. It was the weirdest too, but that kiss pushed it right to the top.

Chapter 8

Ben drove home to the sound of Maya's chatter and his own heart beating loudly in his ears. With everything that was going on at Aunt Lois's, he hadn't realized it – a date. Ben had to laugh. He hadn't meant it to be a date, but in the end, that's what it was. He would have to do better next time. To think that he was going to get his chance so soon. Ben was almost giddy.

Once they got home, he called Carly to come over and open her presents. He wasn't surprised to find that he woke her up. She showed up looking groggy, but a few minutes with Maya and some black coffee perked her up.

"I'm surprised you didn't show up in your pajamas," Ben told her while he made breakfast.

She pinched her fingers together. "This close."

"I just hope your night was half as good as mine," Ben said with a smile.

"I know you didn't get laid at Aunt Lois's, so what are you bragging about?" Carly asked him.

Ben shushed her, but Maya was poking around the presents by the tree and not paying any attention to them.

Though it was closer to lunch than breakfast, Christmas tree shaped pancakes were served, and the living room floor was littered with wrapping paper. Maya was so happy, hugging each present as she unwrapped it. Ben wanted to wrap up the whole world and give it to her. Finally she came over and hugged him and Carly.

"It's the best Christmas!" she said.

Ben and Carly unwrapped their gifts less adorably. Then Carly got to hear all about their dinner at Aunt Lois's and especially about Jason and Alfie.

"So both you and Maya have a new love in your life," Carly concluded.

"That's right. But don't feel left out. Get ready to fall in love with a whole lot more babysitting. Starting tomorrow night," Ben told her.

As long as she could order in on Ben's tab, Carly was fine with that plan. Then she was out of there. She had some gifts to deliver to her friends. Ben now had a whole day left to spend with Maya, to cook Christmas dinner, and to think about Jason.

For their date, Ben picked Ligaya's, a Filipino restaurant right next to Thurston Park. He had noticed the restaurant, but didn't get a chance to try it out. That made it a perfect place to take Jason. They would be on even footing, figuring out if the place was any good together. After Christmas Eve at Aunt Lois's, Jason more than proved that he could

roll with anything.

Jason showed up wearing a long, dark gray coat that accentuated his height and his broad shoulders. Under that he had on slacks and a soft gray sweater that looked very touchable to Ben. But all of Jason looked touchable to him.

The restaurant was casual and welcoming, decorated with stunning nature photos from the Philippines. They got seated quickly. Because of the way they had arranged the date, Ben wasn't sure who did the inviting. As soon as they had menus in their hands, he wanted to make one thing clear.

"Dinner is on me," Ben said as they opened the menus and started looking them over.

"I asked you out," Jason said, and that's exactly why Ben wanted to clear up the confusion.

"I arranged this date and you know it. You never even heard of this place. Now let me spend some of my Christmas bonus on you. This quarter has been good for my company," Ben told him. He was already eyeing the pako salad.

"I thought you worked for a non-profit," Jason said after the waitress came by and they put in their orders.

Ben had already told him his company consulted with businesses and organizations that wanted to be more environmentally friendly. But Earth Saving Solutions was definitely for profit.

"Oh, we kick their asses and we make them pay for it. We do some serious number crunching so they can adopt new policies cost effectively at first and save money in the long run. There is a lot of specialized work when we're dealing with manufacturing and packaging. We're worth every penny."

"Sounds like a good deal all around."

"Most of it is just common sense. I mean, you wouldn't believe how many offices don't recycle. They waste tons of paper printing out every little thing."

Jason smiled at him. "I can see you're passionate about your work."

"Printing a useless two line email uses up a whole sheet of paper that ends up in the trash the next day. It's inexcusable," Ben grumbled.

Jason sat back. "I remember now – cracking the whip to get people to do the right thing. So that's not just a kink, it's your job description," Jason teased him but then he got more serious. "You do good work."

"So do you," Ben said figuring it was time they talked about Jason's line of work.

"Preschool is a cakewalk. At that age, kids are easy," Jason said with a self-deprecating shrug.

Ben thought about Maya and what he said just didn't compute. "Easy? Have you met my daughter, Maya? She scares me more than a little."

"She is something, but she's only four. Maya won't be doing any serous damage for another ten years or so," Jason estimated.

"I am not looking forward to being ignored and disdained."

"Is that why you want a man, so you're not facing the terror of Maya's teenaged years alone?"

"Do guys last that long?" Ben asked. "Mine don't. Two years max. That's why I didn't bother lining up a second dad for Maya before I had her."

Jason frowned. "So you're not looking for anything lasting?"

"I'm looking. I just don't want to set myself up for disappointment." Ben eyed him accusingly. "I mean, look at you. You wanted nothing to do with me."

"What? When?" Jason asked, dismayed.

"When I asked you if you were volunteering to be my love life, you scoffed and sneered at the idea," Ben reminded him. He didn't hide that he was still holding a grudge about that.

"I didn't scoff and sneer. You were a parent of one of my students. I couldn't get involved with you, plus I heard your list," Jason said the last part with a hint of bitterness. "I got the impression that you wouldn't want to date a lowly preschool teacher."

Ben was going to deny that, but their food arrived. Once their dinner was in front of them, he told Jason, "Maybe don't take a four-year-old's word about what I want in a guy."

"Maya was quoting you," Jason said as he took a forkful of his crispy beef.

"Was she?" Ben was skeptical of that.

"Kind of," Jason said, pretty much admitting that her quote wasn't very accurate. "But I figured there had to be some truth in it."

Ben gave Jason a wry look. "Is that why you were teasing me so mercilessly?"

"I thought you didn't want me. I had to let you have it a little."

Ben took a drink of his water. "I did have my fingers crossed that Maya would get me a jet setting billionaire. I wouldn't have turned down a multimillionaire. But a preschool teacher was a close third." Actually, right now Ben couldn't imagine anyone he would rather have sitting across from him.

Jason's dark brown eyes were teasing but kind. With Ben staring at him so intently, Jason looked away. Now Ben could admire his sharp jaw line and the enticing shape of his mouth. Looking back at him, Jason squirmed a little and cleared his throat. As he reached for his water, Ben measured the easy pressure of his long fingers wrapped

around the glass. When Jason brought the glass to his mouth, Ben held his breath. He watched his lips part and his throat work as he swallowed.

"Next you'll be groping me under the table," Jason mumbled as he set his glass down.

"Keep looking so shy and sexy and I just might."

"Who's shy?" Jason said defensively and gave him a challenging glare.

"Damn, those eyes of yours are gorgeous," Ben told him.

"Only one of us has irresistible blue eyes and it's not me."

Ben wasn't going to let him turn this around on him. "I could stare at you all night," he told Jason as he leaned in across the table. "If we were anywhere else, I would show you what you've done to me. Here, I can only look at you and tell you."

"You're something else," Jason told him with a shake of his head. "My ego took some bruising recently. Take it easy on me."

"For a bruised ego, I think this is just what you need."

Jason didn't deny that. "I might need it and want it, but I don't know if I can handle it," he said. "I don't think anyone has ever burned me up with their eyes the way you're doing."

"That's because you have me in the palm of your hand."

Ben gave him a break as they finished up dinner and paid the check. For after dinner, Ben hadn't made any kind of plan. As he and Jason stepped out of the restaurant, the cold air hit them hard. They stood on the sidewalk until Ben pointed at the park across the street.

"Let's walk off some of that dinner."

Stepping off the curb, Jason asked, "What exactly are you going to walk off? You only had a salad."

"I have Christmas Eve and Christmas Day dinner to walk off too."

As they reached the edge of the park, Jason looked him up and down appreciatively. "Don't get me wrong. I like that you keep in shape."

"I kind of got obsessed with eating right after I had Maya. Because of her, I want to live as long as I can and stay healthy."

"I like the sound of that and I plan to take full advantage of the side benefits," Jason told him and grinned at him.

Ahead of them in the park, the fountain and the paths were lit. The bare branches of trees were stark against the faint glow of the night sky. The air was cold. Ben could see their breaths fog up. Considering how cold it was, maybe this walk wasn't the best idea. But there was no such thing as a bad idea if he got to spend time with Jason.

They followed a path that would take them toward the pond. Maya always wanted to visit it in winter to see if it was frozen. It hardly ever froze. Ben and Jason stood on the edge of the dark water. Their reflections in the surface of the pond were merely shadows. This area

of the park wasn't as well lit and some of the lights were smothered by the evergreens that grew here.

"I don't know if I feel safe with you." Jason looked around. "You'll have me naked in the bushes next."

"If it wasn't freezing cold, I would."

The idea of being naked wasn't appealing even though the pond was more sheltered from the wind so the cold didn't have as much bite. The surface of the water was still and smooth as glass. On the other side, there was a pile of boulders. In nicer weather, Ben had climbed up there to take in the view.

Ben led the way along the edge of the pond. Their shoes crunched on gravel and then they were standing on a spot Ben remembered. The first time he saw the little alcove among the big rocks, he had thought to himself that's not a bad makeout spot. Ready to prove it, he turned to Jason and pulled him into the narrow space.

"It fits you perfectly," he said, seeing Jason's broad shoulders pressed into the rock.

Now there was just enough room for Ben to fit himself in there.

"That's why you lured me here," Jason whispered in his ear.

"Yes, I'm always luring you places so I can take advantage of you," Ben said. He was ready to take all his accusations and prove them right.

"You better," Jason said with a smile and angled his head, coming in for a kiss. His hands were digging around, looking for a way in under all those layers. "Too many layers, damn it," he complained.

Ben agreed with a grunt and got back to kissing him. He was feeling overheated as their tongues probed each other's mouths. The push and pull of having Jason in his arms, when he knew they couldn't take it any further, was driving him crazy. Body tingling with excitement, he didn't want to let go.

"I feel like a damn teenager," Ben gasped when they stopped to breathe.

Having to end their kiss was agony. Ben moaned into Jason's shoulder then raised his eyes to him. "Hang onto something. I have another compliment for you. You're a great kisser," Ben told him.

"You never let up." Jason gave him a shy smile, and Ben had to kiss him again.

As their date was coming to an end, they walked very slowly, not wanting to go their separate ways. The air was freezing cold, the sky starry and clear. Their breaths fogged up and their hands grazed, sending up sparks. Or at least that's how it seemed to Ben. They couldn't delay forever though. The corner where they would split up

was ahead.

Jason stopped just short of it. "How would you like to be my New Year's date?" he asked.

"Seriously?" Ben said. Surprised and pleased, he rushed into Jason's arms. Then he got worried. "Is that when I'll see you next?"

"No." Jason shook his head while Ben pulled him tighter against him. "Can't risk that. We need to practice that New Year's kiss. We don't want to look like amateurs."

"No, we do not," Ben agreed and leaned in for some more practice.

When they stopped, Jason had more to say. "Bring Maya too."

"Really?"

Jason told him more about what he had planned. "It's one night out of town at a fancy hotel, The Forester. You might have heard of it. I think she'll like it. There'll be dancing and fireworks."

"Damn right there'll be fireworks," Ben said and watched a smile light up Jason's face.

Chapter 9

Jason was out with Alfie for a long walk around town. Alfie loved to scamper around and sniff everything in sight, but Jason preferred to carry him most of the way. He worried that the sidewalks were too cold. He also worried that he might be babying him too much, but he just couldn't help it. At least he was sure that Alfie would stay warm as long as he held him.

Just as the words "overprotective dad" popped into his head, he saw Maya coming his way. A college aged girl was holding her hand. The girl had very straight, long, dark blond hair and resembled Ben and Maya a little.

"It's Alfie!" Maya ran straight to him.

"I'm here too," Jason said. He set Alfie on the pavement, and the dog jumped up to greet Maya eagerly.

"Maya, you want to introduce us?" the girl said.

Jason guessed that she was Ben's sister, but Maya wasn't ready to confirm that.

"This is Alfie," Maya said.

"And the humans?" Jason prompted her.

Maya finally looked up at them. "That's my Aunt Carly. And that's Mr. Kenney, but sometimes his name is Jason."

"Well sometimes my name is Caroline," Carly told her.

"Nooo." Maya was shocked by this news.

"Don't worry about it. No one calls me that except Mom and Dad when I'm in trouble." She smiled down at Maya then greeted Jason. "Hi, it's nice to meet the famous Christmas gift," Carly said.

"So are you guys shopping or returning?" Jason said, seeing her shopping bags.

"A little bit of both," Carly said as they continued walking together. "We're meeting Ben for a late lunch at Zandy's. You should come with us."

Zandy's was a sandwich place right around the corner. If Ben was going to be there, Jason couldn't pass up the chance to see him. "I won't invite myself to lunch, but I'll say hi."

"What are you talking about? I'm inviting you to lunch," Carly said, showing her bossy, Owens streak.

It didn't take them long to get there and find Ben waiting for them in front. As Maya ran up to him for a hug, Ben was surprised to see that Jason and Alfie were there too. The happiness in his eyes was unmistakable. Jason wondered if he had the same bright-eyed look when he saw Ben.

"We ran into them and Maya introduced us," Carly explained.

"You're joining us for lunch, right?" Ben asked him.

His blue eyes locked on Jason's only briefly, but they still made Jason's breath catch in his throat. A little flustered, Jason looked away quickly. Ben's eyes had way too much power over him.

"I just wanted to say hi. I can't go in there with Alfie anyway." Jason pointed his thumb inside the sandwich shop then leaned down and scratched Alfie behind his floppy ears.

"We'll grab something and eat on the go. I don't have much time anyway," Ben said. His eyes were on Jason again, and he was powerless against them.

"Anything you want," Jason blurted out with too much feeling.

"You didn't mean to say that out loud, did you?" Ben's sister teased him.

Soon they all had sandwiches in their hands, and Jason even let Maya feed a few bites of his turkey on rye to Alfie. Maya and Alfie led the way while Carly trailed behind, texting and walking. Ben and Jason walked side by side, letting their arms brush, their elbows bump. Too quickly they ended up in front of Ben's apartment building.

Seeing Ben for such a short time made Jason greedy to spend more time with him. Just as he was about to ask him to dinner, Ben beat him to the punch. He asked Jason to come over for dinner at his place.

"Or if you're not busy, you can come up with us now," Carly jumped in to say. "Maya would love it, right?"

Ben narrowed his eyes at his sister suspiciously then he turned to Maya. "You want to hang out with Jason and Alfie?" Ben asked her.

"Yes, yes, yes," Maya said and jumped in place.

Jason looked down at her. "Is any of that about me?"

As if to answer his question, Maya ignored him and got down to hug Alfie. Since Jason didn't have plans, he went to Ben's apartment. Mostly he did it because he didn't want to separate Maya and Alfie.

On the ride up in the elevator, Carly told Jason, "I can understand why Maya wanted to tie a ribbon around you."

"I was her avenue of last resort. But I'm sure she would have liked me better if she knew about Alfie."

"The four of you make a pretty picture," Carly said and made a frame with her hands. "The perfect family."

Jason looked over at Maya, but she was preoccupied with Alfie. "Maybe you shouldn't put it like that," he said as they stepped out of the elevator. "Ben and I have been on exactly one official date."

"Then stop looking so good together," Carly said with a shrug as she ushered them all into Ben's apartment. Then she whispered, "I saw you making eyes at each other."

"You invited me here just so you could enjoy my embarrassment some more," Jason accused her.

"I don't mind seeing that you like my brother so much."

Stepping inside, Jason got his first look at Ben's apartment. The furniture had clean, modern lines in light colored wood. There was a sofa that looked very comfortable. One living room wall was floor to ceiling shelves full of books. Plenty of them were kids' books plus lots of nonfiction. He wasn't surprised to see books relating to Ben's job.

The kitchen was white with glass fronts and a dark brown countertop. Seeing the kitchen gave Jason an idea on how to keep busy until Ben got home. He texted Ben to ask if it was OK if he started dinner.

"Knock yourself out," Ben told him.

It was still early, but Jason figured he would need extra time in an unfamiliar kitchen. Carly was busy on her laptop so Jason decided to find his own way around. Seeing him looking in the fridge and opening the cupboards, Maya came over to see what he was up to.

"Are you looking for snacks?" Maya asked him.

"No. I'm going to make dinner for your dad," Jason told her.

"I want to help."

Jason had to agree, though, in his experience, a little kid's help didn't make cooking any easier.

"What does your dad like to eat?" Jason asked her as he took inventory of what he had to work with.

"Food."

"Food. OK. I'll put that on my list."

"He likes salad. He likes to put chicken in a salad, but chicken is better in a nugget," Maya said. Then she peered up at him. "Don't you want to know what I like?"

"Let me guess, chicken nuggets and pizza."

"Yes! I love chicken nuggets and pizza! How did you know?!" Maya said with genuine astonishment.

"I'm a teacher. I know lots of stuff."

Maya looked impressed with him for the first time ever. "I like fries too," she said like she wanted to make sure he knew that. "But no fries for Daddy. For Daddy, it has to be healthy food. It can't be anything good."

"OK. I won't make it too good," Jason told her.

After finding some white meat and plenty of vegetables, he decided to make chicken stir-fry. Ben shouldn't have any objections to that. While Alfie was curled up in the corner of the kitchen, Maya was right there to help Jason wash the vegetables and get his shirt wet. After that there wasn't much for her to do.

Jason handed her a rubber spatula. "Hold this until I need it," he told her. She shouldn't be able to do too much damage with something like that.

That's when Carly closed her laptop and came over. "What's this? Maya looks armed and dangerous," she said, looking at the rubber spatula Maya was holding at the ready.

"She's helping me cook," Jason said while Maya beamed proudly at him and her aunt.

"That's what you call it now," Carly said and raised an eyebrow at her niece. "Just don't let her near any seasonings."

Jason looked at the saltshaker in his hand.

"Shake, shake, shake! Can I?" Maya said enthusiastically.

Carly and Jason both said no to that.

"But it's fun," Maya protested.

Next Maya watched as Jason cut up the chicken and got it ready to go into the wok.

"What about eggs?" Maya asked.

"Eggs?"

"I want to break them," Maya said.

"There are no eggs in this," Jason told her.

"Awwww," she said.

Jason looked at Carly, who was watching the action from a barstool on the other side of the kitchen counter.

"Someone let her handle eggs?" Jason asked.

"Only once," Carly said with a smirk. "There were eggs. There was a mixer. Maya needed a bath after that fiasco."

Hearing her, Maya said, "A mixer! Yes!"

"A mixer. No," Carly told her.

Jason managed to make the stir-fry without any kind of disaster. Once he was done, he presented the dish for inspection. Maya looked it over and gave her final verdict. "It looks nice. Are you sure it's not good? Daddy won't like it if it's good."

That's when Ben arrived. Maya ran over to him, and he picked her up for a hug and a kiss. Even Alfie ran over to greet him. While Carly was setting the table, Jason was clearing up in the kitchen.

"And he cooks," Ben said as he came over to him.

"What do you mean 'and'? Are you saying I have other good qualities?" Jason wanted to know.

"Well, it looks like you also clean," Ben teased him.

"I hope you approve of what I made. If not, blame Maya. She helped. She's a very enthusiastic cook," Jason told him.

"Oh, God. You didn't let her do anything, did you?" Ben looked around the kitchen for signs of damage.

Jason laughed at him. "I had her hand me a few things. Mostly she acted in an advisory capacity."

"Maya loves to cook, and the more noise and mess the better."

"We managed not to demolish your kitchen," Jason told him and kissed him lightly on the mouth, just in greeting. He wasn't trying to start anything, but Ben still gave him a wicked look.

Chapter 10

After dinner, Jason took Alfie for a walk with Maya's help. When they came back, Ben and Carly were already finishing up the dinner dishes. While he lingered, Jason noticed a group of pictures on the wall by the kitchen. They were of Maya as a baby. Ben was holding her in some of them and beaming down at her with love and trepidation.

As Jason examined the pictures, Ben watched him with a faint smile. Jason could only imagine how many memories each photo represented. Maya was only a little bundle in his arms, so tiny but with such a powerful grip on his heart.

Noticing what Jason was doing, Maya came over. Alfie followed after her, and Jason wondered if he would need to remind him whose dog he was. Joining him, Maya stood on her tiptoes and pointed at a picture of herself as a baby. "Look, it's baby Maya," she said like she wasn't a hundred percent convinced that the baby was her.

"You were a cute baby," Jason told her.

"Aha, but babies cry a lot."

"You didn't," Ben told her.

"Aunt Carly said I did. She babysitted me when I was a baby."

"Hey, teacher, aren't you going to correct her?" Carly asked him.

"I'm off the clock."

Soon after that Carly went to meet some friends. Jason thought he might leave too, but Ben and Maya wouldn't hear of it. Maya went so far as to block the door.

"I bet she'd let me go if I left Alfie here," Jason said.

"Let's test your theory," Ben proposed. "Hey, Maya, can Jason leave if Alfie stays here with us?"

Maya turned her face up and gave Jason a very serious look. Her decision was unequivocal. "No. You have to stay. We'll watch *Bolt*. It has a dog in it. Alfie will like it too."

"See, she already has plans for you, so don't sell yourself short," Ben told him.

In fact Maya was so determined to make him stay, she took his hand and led him to the couch. "You're still Daddy's present. Don't try to run away," she told him sternly.

"I guess I own you forever," Ben said as he sat down next to him.

"Daddy, you have to make popcorn," Maya reminded him before he could get comfortable.

Except for a quick trip to the store for some dog food while Ben made popcorn, Jason got to spend the whole evening at Ben's. Then it

was time for Maya's bedtime. Jason was surprised that she didn't give Ben more trouble about going to bed, but she went to get ready right away. A little later Jason watched her run out of her bedroom in her pajamas. She came to sit between him and Ben on the couch.

"Now we watch a cartoon," Maya announced.

"It's part of our bedtime routine," Ben told him as he started it up.

"That's funny," Jason said when he saw which cartoon they were watching.

"You like Fillipa?" Maya asked him.

"Sure I do," Jason told her.

There was no doubt that Maya liked the cartoon about the purple haired girl. She squealed as soon as the opening theme started and sang along softly. She knew every word.

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As they watched a cartoon together, Ben worried that Jason might be overdosing on family time just about now, but he saw no sign of that. He seemed perfectly happy to spend time with both him and Maya. Of course Maya was on her way to bed. Ben looked forward to some alone time.

Jason was eying another photo when Ben came back from putting Maya to bed. The picture on the side table was of Maya standing in the grass in a pink dress, holding a basket of colorful eggs.

"That's from the Easter egg hunt at my parents' house. My dad was always really good at hiding eggs. Maya is good at finding them, not like me. I spent my third Easter crying because my brother, Will, found all the eggs before I could."

Jason laughed. "That's not how I want to think of you, but now that will be the image of you I'll have stuck in my head forever."

"Maya disapproved too. Of course her Uncle Will had to tell her all about it."

"I can imagine." Jason smiled as Ben sat next to him. They got comfortable on the couch with Alfie curled up on Jason's lap. "I kind of want to go back in time to be there so I can see you hold Maya for the first time," Jason said and looked over at the pictures on the wall. "I bet that was something."

"Something earthshaking, yes. You could have watched me fall apart while Carly and Will took pictures." Maya was squirmy and soft, but her power over his heart was immeasurable. "I always wanted to share that moment with the right guy, laugh and cry together, be terrified together. One of us would hyperventilate. Now I know who I was thinking of." Ben looked at Jason intently until there was no doubt who he had in mind.

"Me? You can't be that sure of me," Jason said.

"Why not? I'm an excellent judge of character," Ben said and placed his hand on Jason's thigh.

"That's not my character," Jason told him. "You're brave to have a kid. I was afraid to get a dog."

"You were afraid of Alfie?" Ben said as he petted him.

"A dog can break your heart too," Jason pointed out.

"Alfie would never do that," Ben said. As if he wanted to prove him wrong, Alfie chose right that moment to climb down from Jason's lap.

"See? He left me," Jason complained.

"More room for me," Ben said. He threw a leg over Jason's thighs and climbed on his lap.

Jason's hands were on his hips, rubbing up and down. His chest was rising and falling. Drawn by the irresistible place where Jason's shirt collar opened, Ben moved in to nuzzle his neck. Inhaling deeply, he kissed his throat. He could feel Jason's low moans as he groped his chest. Jason's hands were busy rubbing his back and mussing his hair.

"We need to cool it," Ben said as he kissed the edge of Jason's earlobe and then his jaw.

"Your words and your actions are contradicting each other," Jason panted.

He moaned as their mouths met in a deep kiss and their hips started a slow grind. Then Ben grabbed him by the hair, and Jason's spun him around and laid him out on the couch. Now Ben was panting and moaning as Jason kissed his neck and slid his hand under his sweater.

"So need to cool it," Ben said and grabbed Jason's tight ass to pull him closer.

Neither one of them slowed down in the least. Alfie had to intervene. While the two of them continued to kiss and grope, Alfie propped himself up on the edge of the couch next to their heads. He stood on his hind legs and stared at them until they stopped kissing.

"At least one of us has some sense," Ben said while looking at the dog.

"Don't encourage him." Jason grumbled as he raised himself up on one elbow. "And don't you be a cock-blocker," he said to Alfie and scratched his head.

Now that Alfie was back and asking for some attention, Jason and Ben were sitting up again. Alfie was stretched out between them, a little black and white, floppy eared chaperone. It wasn't easy to keep their hands off each other. Jason reached over Alfie's tiny form and placed his hand on Ben's thigh. His hand felt good there or anywhere on him. After a quick squeeze, his hand moved up then down, but never went high enough. Ben groaned.

"Am I torturing you?" Jason asked wickedly.

"Yes."

"Good to know. I hate to suffer alone."

"This is a good kind of suffering. It promises more," Ben told him.

"We're being so good. There has to be a reward for this." Jason leaned in and they kissed. With their lips still touching, Jason murmured, "You're too much, and being wanted is an incredible aphrodisiac." Jason got thoughtful for a second. "Actually, I was hot for you even when I thought you didn't want me."

"Me not want you? That's impossible. You're a catch. Coming over here, cooking for your man like a boyfriend or something."

"Your boyfriend talk doesn't scare me," Jason claimed.

Ben eyed him with wonder. "So you're going to be my boyfriend on a dare?"

"That's just the kind of guy I am." Then Jason got a little more serious. "I wouldn't be coming over here, spending time with you and Maya if I wasn't serious."

"That's just the kind of guy you are," Ben smiled. "I can't wait to make you my boyfriend."

"I better make my escape before you drag me off to bed with you." Jason was up on his feet, getting ready to leave.

Ben got up too. Wrapping his arms around Jason, he leaned against him and closed his eyes. "I don't want you to go."

"But I better. We're still on for New Year's?"

"Anywhere you're going to be on New Year's is where I want to be."

"I'll be in a fancy hotel with you and Maya."

"Thank you for including her," Ben told him.

"Think of what would happen if we watched fireworks without her," Jason said.

"You're just too nice," Ben told him and gave him a kiss.

Jason went to get Alfie and the bag of dog food he got for him, but Ben stopped him.

"No. Leave the dog food here. You'll need it for next time you and Alfie stay over."

"Should I bring my toothbrush too?"

"Definitely. You've been hijacked for life and your little dog too," Ben said. He looked at Alfie, held in the crook of Jason's arm.

As Ben stood with him at the door, Jason took his hand and held it. Before he let it go, he brought Ben's hand up to his lips and kissed it.

Watching him leave, Ben vowed to himself that this was the last time he would let him walk out that door. He laughed at himself, at the tightness in his chest, and at every desperate, unsatisfied urge he had regarding Jason. It seemed too ridiculous, but the pain and longing he felt as he shut the door were very real. This day was exactly how he

wanted his life to be forever but with a ton of sex thrown into the mix.

Chapter 11

Time spent with Jason rushed by, while time without him crawled. The seconds seemed frozen. Ben wanted to shake every clock and make it move faster. He was in this state of suppressed impatience until finally the morning of New Year's Eve arrived.

First they picked up Jason and Alfie then dropped off Alfie with Jason's friend, Iris. When they parked in front of her building, Maya didn't let Jason go up without her. She insisted on meeting Iris to make sure she was nice and good enough to take care of Alfie. Ben stayed in the car and watched Maya come out holding Jason's hand.

"She's nice and pretty," Maya reported while Jason buckled her back into her car seat.

Maya was excited to be going to a fancy New Year's party. Carly had helped her shop for the complete outfit from shoes to sparkly pins for her hair. Meanwhile, Ben filled his phone with pictures of her trying on every single dress she set eyes on. Now her dress was laid out on one side of the back seat along with Ben's and Jason's suits. They were all set.

The drive was nice though the view out the window was kind of bleak. The trees were bare, the river water brown, and there wasn't a green field in sight. Then Ben saw what he had been waiting for. From the rise in the highway, they could see the mounds of white by the road ahead of them.

At first, Maya didn't notice the snow in the distance. Ben knew it had been snowing in the area, but he didn't tell her. He wanted it to be a surprise, and it was. When she saw the snow out the car window, she jumped and screamed in her car seat.

"I'm just glad she's strapped down," Ben said seeing her so excited. "I think she's ready to jump out of the car."

Maya confirmed this. "I want to play in the snow," she said while they were still on the road.

"We'll be there soon. Then you can play," Ben promised her. He turned to smile at Jason.

Now the view out the window turned pretty. They passed a nice wooded area where the snow was thick with only a little bit of green showing from the fir trees. Maya was beside herself. To her the wait seemed endless even when they were only a few minutes from the hotel.

The road to the hotel was lined with a row of big, perfectly spaced trees. Snow and ice decorated the bare branches. The road had been cleared, but everything else was a smooth, unbroken white. As they got closer to the hotel, they could see footsteps dotting the snow here

and there.

They went through a high, iron gate toward a courtyard. Crisscrossing paths were lined with mounds of white. The grounds looked like they were sculpted out of snow with the green poking through on the fat evergreen bushes. A trio of fountains poured water under caps of ice and snow.

In the middle of all that, the imposing, white structure of the hotel became a part of the snowy landscape. To Maya, it must have looked like a fairytale castle. But what excited her most was all the snow.

She couldn't wait to be released from her car seat. The first thing she did when she jumped out of the car was make a snowball and throw it at Ben. The next one was for Jason as soon as he was in range. Neither one landed very hard, but they acted like they were hit by cannon balls. Then Maya got to make one snow angel before they went inside.

The lobby was huge. Wood columns went up to a high ceiling. Seating in leather and forest green was off to the side in some cozy, wood paneled alcoves. The main seating area was dominated by a stone fireplace where the fire burned low. As they checked in, friendly, welcoming staff greeted them from behind an imposing registration desk.

Then it was up to their suite in a fancy elevator. Ben stopped as the bellhop opened the double doors to a huge, beautifully decorated living area. Two windows framed in dark wood gave them a view of snow covered treetops. Between them a set of French doors opened to a balcony. The furniture was cozy and elegant, the carpet plush. Ben whistled as they went in.

"Are we really staying here?" he asked after the bellhop left them alone.

Jason had told him that his friend, Nathan, was hosting them here and had invited Jason to the party, but Ben wasn't expecting anything so impressive.

"Nathan is rolling in it. Our suite is on him. It was a single when it was just me, but I told him I was bringing you and Maya. Now we have two bedrooms."

"I'm speechless," Ben said as he looked around.

"Wait till you hear how he made his money," Jason said with a mysterious smile.

"Porn?" Ben whispered in his ear.

Jason drew back. For some reason he seemed appalled. "Not even close. Why was that the first thing you thought of?"

"I guess you, me and a hotel put dirty thoughts in my head," Ben said.

Ben went to the French doors where Maya was looking out at the

wide balcony with its own covering of snow. Clumps of it were on the railing.

"We can have a snow ball fight right out there," Ben said.

"Yes!" Maya said ready to go right now.

"Don't you want to see your room first?" Jason asked her.

"My room?" Maya looked around for it.

Jason led the way and they all stood in the doorway of a beautiful bedroom.

"Her room is huge," Ben said.

The furniture was classic and elegant. A high, tufted headboard in light gray dominated one wall. Two windows looked out at a snowy landscape right out of a Christmas card.

"That bed right there is fit for a princess," Ben said to Maya.

"Me!" she said, taking on the title without hesitation.

"You won't be scared sleeping here all by yourself, will you?" Ben asked her.

"No, I won't be scared," Maya said. She seemed offended at the question. "I have my own room at home."

"I'll be right out here," Ben pointed at the sofa in the living room.

"I thought we would share the other room," Jason whispered in his ear while Maya looked out her window.

"I want to set a good example for Maya."

"Then I'll take the sofa," Jason said.

"No way. But I appreciate the offer." Ben leaned in for a kiss while Maya went to bounce on the bed.

The three of them settled in though they didn't have much to unpack. The main thing was to hang up their clothes for tonight. As he and Jason put their suits in the bedroom on the other side of the suite, Ben asked, "So how come your friend likes to treat you to all this?" He wasn't jealous, much.

"Nathan gives me credit for encouraging him to take a chance on the app that made him a ton of money. That's why he likes to treat me to stuff like this," Jason explained.

"An app?"

"That is your first clue. Now for the next one. What popular cartoon started out as an educational app?" Jason asked like it was a quiz show.

That's when Ben realized what he was saying. "Fillipa Flips? You're kidding."

Jason smiled. "Right on the nose. Nathan is Nathan Lee, the creator of Fillipa. It all started with the math app. I gave him the tiniest little push. All I told him was to go for it, and then it just snowballed from there."

Ben had gotten Maya all the apps. The original math app was pretty basic. Fillipa did a flip and a dance every time a kid got an answer right. When they got an answer wrong, she said, "That's OK. You can try again." More Fillipa Flips apps popped up on different subjects. The app got more elaborate and popular until Fillipa got her own cartoon. Now there was a whole series of apps and tons of merchandise based on the little cheerful, energetic, purple haired girl. And best of all, Maya was crazy about her.

"Maya will get to meet Nathan soon. He and his husband are staying here too," Jason said while Ben was still standing there stunned.

"He better get ready to autograph her face."

"Text from Nathan," Jason announced a few minutes later. "He and his hubby are just finishing lunch. They'll wait for us downstairs."

They went to collect Maya from her room and Jason told her, "There is someone I want you to meet. You know the name Nathan Lee, right? He's the creator of Fillipa Flips, and he's a friend of mine."

"Fillipa! Do you know her?" Maya asked.

"She's a cartoon character," Jason said and looked over at Ben helplessly.

"But do you know her?" Maya insisted.

"No, but I know the guy who created her, and you'll get to meet him."

"He knows Fillipa?"

"Yes. Yes, he does," Jason said, giving up on trying to acquaint Maya with reality. He did give Ben an accusing look for snickering, hanging back and generally leaving him to flounder like that.

"What do you want from me? You're the professional educator," Ben told him.

Jason's friends were waiting in the sitting area off the lobby. They both wore tweed suits. One of them had a reddish beard, bushy eyebrows and glasses. The other one was very trim, dark skinned and also wore glasses. They looked like two eccentric, young professors. Both guys smiled when they saw Jason. After they both hugged him, he introduced them as Nathan and Lionel Lee.

"He made Fillipa," Jason said and pointed at his redheaded friend, Nathan.

"Like Daddy made me?" Maya asked Nathan.

Nathan paused, not sure how to answer. They all looked at him, waiting.

"Kind of," he finally said.

Lionel put an arm around his shoulder, laughed and kissed him on his bearded cheek.

Maya looked from Nathan to Lionel. "Are you boyfriends?" she wanted to know.

"We're husbands," they told her proudly and flashed their wedding rings. Show-offs.

"Is that better than boyfriends?" she asked turning to Ben.

Lionel and Nathan answered instead, "Yes. Much better." They were so smug.

Maya looked at her dad and Jason sternly. They weren't even officially boyfriends yet.

"We'll be husbands one day, don't worry," Jason assured her.

Maya approved.

Ben grumbled to Jason. "Seriously, the things you say in the name of one-upmanship..."

"Are all true," Jason asserted.

Ben didn't really blame him. Actually, he liked the sound of Jason's promise. When Ben put his arm around him, he saw a quick grin brightened his face.

They all talked for a while, getting to know each other. After Nathan and Lionel left, the three of them headed to lunch in the hotel restaurant. Before they could go inside the restaurant, Maya stopped them.

With arms raised, she turned to Jason. "Pick me up. I want to hug you," she demanded. Once he had her in his arms, she hugged him and said, "I got to meet Fillipa's dad. You're the best present ever."

"Me? Thank you," Jason said, touched.

"Dad likes you too."

"She's right about that. You're the hero of the day," Ben said. As they went in he threw an arm over Jason's shoulder. "Look at you. You're a hit."

"Little kids are easy to impress. Try impressing a high-schooler. You'd have to chew off your own limb or something."

"Is that why you're a preschool teacher?"

"You bet."

"Best decision you ever made. Otherwise you wouldn't have been in the right place, at the right time for Maya to give you to me as a present," Ben told him. He hated to think of never meeting Jason. It was weird how fast he went from hardly know him to can't live without him.

Chapter 12

Right after lunch, they took Maya out into the hotel courtyard to play. They couldn't keep her from the snow when it was right outside the door. Maya darted out and into the snow, the red ball on her knit cap bouncing. Of course she immediately made two snowballs and threw them at Ben and Jason. They pretended to be mortally wounded. She wanted to run in the snow, roll in it, and make a million snowballs to throw at them.

Once they had gone all through the courtyard, they went outside the gate. All around them, tree branches were covered in snow. As they explored outside the hotel grounds, they came across big mounds of pure white snow.

"Might be deep," Jason said.

Ben picked up Maya and they took a few steps. Right away, they sank in past their knees. Good thing he was carrying Maya, or she would have been swallowed up.

"I see a bird," she said and pointed up at a tiny brown bird balancing itself on a very thin branch. As the bird hopped from branch to branch, Maya followed it with her eyes. "You think the bird is cold," she asked Jason and Ben.

"Someone should knit it a tiny sweater," Ben joked.

Jason answered more seriously. "Don't worry. It has feathers to keep it warm. I think that might be a winter wren. Its name tells you that it's not scared to be out in the cold."

The little brown bird never stopped chirping and hopping from branch to branch.

"It's talking to us," Maya said.

After they walked for a few minutes they found an area where the snow wasn't too deep and Maya could play safely. Looking adorable in her hat with the fuzzy red ball on top, she was running around like she wanted to own all that snow.

"I'm starting to realize how tough parents have it," Jason said as the two of them watched her.

"You are realizing this just now?"

"Yes, while I was trying to figure out how to tell her Fillipa isn't real without making her cry."

"After that you can figure out a way to tell her about Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny," Ben said.

"Then I'll be all set to teach Childhood Disillusionment 101."

"You cave every time and tell her whatever she wants to hear," Ben said to him. Then he admitted, "Actually I don't know how to tell her that stuff either."

"If you want me to get all professional about it, you don't need to worry too much about that. Mostly kids figure out what isn't real on their own, and they let go when they're ready."

"I think I just want her to stay a kid and believe that everything is magical."

"There are other things to believe in," Jason said and gazed at him for what seemed like forever. Their heads inclined. Their foreheads touched and then they turned their heads for a kiss. As they pulled away, they saw that Maya was watching them.

"Maybe I better talk to her," Ben said. He wasn't sure how to start, but Maya took the lead.

"You were kissing, that means you like Jason," she said.

"He was a present from you. Of course I like him," Ben told her.

"I like him too," Maya said and smiled up at Jason.

"You don't like him more than me, do you," Ben teased her.

"You don't want me to like him?" Maya asked.

"Sure I do."

Maya took his gloved hand in her mittened one. "Don't worry, Daddy. I could never like anyone more than you," she told him. "I love you the most."

"OK, I love you the most too," Ben said and hugged her. "Hey, Maya, I was thinking that maybe Jason could be my boyfriend."

Maya was all for it. "Yes! That's why I got him for you."

"A boyfriend isn't just for Christmas?" Ben asked her.

"No. Jason can be your boyfriend all the time." She smiled at Ben then at Jason. "Now you're boyfriends," Maya announced. Then she looked at Jason with a thoughtful frown. "Where do we put him?"

"Sounds like you're moving in," Ben teased him.

"You think that scares me? That doesn't scare me," Jason said.

"You're playing right into our hands," Ben said.

"You don't need to find room for me yet, but someday soon, you will," Jason told Maya then looked at Ben defiantly.

"Sounds good to me," Ben told him and smiled.

Jason looked surprised. A wonderful, sweet guy like that, and he still didn't understand the depth of his own appeal.

Ben looked at Maya as she ran off to play in the snow, then he turned to Jason. "I've never been this determined to have anyone. My heart tells me you're my guy. We want the same thing and we're going to make it happen. What's so surprising about that? Don't I meet your requirements for a guy?" Ben challenged him.

"I just want a guy who loves me," Jason said simply.

"You know, if you get one of those, you'll have to love him back."

"I will. I definitely will," Jason said and they both knew they were talking about each other. It seemed too soon to say the words even if

it was what both of them felt.

Chapter 13

As they talked about love, Jason tried to tell himself it was too soon. But then he remembered how a warm feeling spread through his whole body at the first sight of Ben. Now that feeling was with him all the time and he never wanted it to end.

"Don't you dare break my heart," he warned Ben.

"Like he did?"

"He who?" Though Jason remembered the hurt he caused him, Troy himself seemed like a distant memory.

"Your guy, what's his name," Ben said.

"You're my only guy," Jason said and slipped his arms around Ben's waist.

"Oh. OK then," Ben said like he forgot why he even mentioned that other guy. Then he seemed to remember. "I'm jealous of anyone who can break your heart."

"My heart is fine. Beating like crazy any time I'm near you, looking at you, or thinking about you." Jason looked down, avoiding the fiery look that came into Ben's blue eyes. He felt Ben's arms encircle his neck and then the soft touch of his lips.

They broke apart while Jason sighed and his heart hammered away. Holding hands, they watched Maya using a stick to draw shapes in the snow.

"I don't know how you can have any love left with that little whirlwind in your life." Jason was amazed that she already had such a strong grip on his heart.

"There's always more love," Ben said and a dreamy look came into his eyes. "But sometimes it does feel like my heart will burst when I look at her. Wanting to have a kid just never prepared me for what it would feel like to actually have one. It just knocks you out. It's too much."

"She is an amazing kid," Jason said just as Maya ran over to them.

"Let’s build a snowman," she said.

"Why just one? Let's build a snowman army," Jason said.

They made one big snowman and a whole bunch of snowkids, as Maya called then. The next challenge was getting Maya in out of the cold. With all that snow to play in, Maya didn't want to go back to the hotel at first.

"You mean you don't want to have some hot chocolate?" Ben asked to tempt her inside.

Maya scrunched up her face in consternation. She was very conflicted and then the hot chocolate won.

Once they were in the hotel restaurant, they had a light supper as well. After that Ben planned to have Maya take a nap. She was so excited about the New Year's Eve party, Jason wasn't sure Ben's plan would pan out. Even as Maya was in her pajamas and in bed, she wasn't ready to go to sleep.

"You need a nap if you want to stay up for the New Year's countdown," Ben told her as he got her to lie down.

"But I'm not sleepy," Maya objected.

"This nap is so you don't turn into a pumpkin at the stroke of midnight," Jason told her.

"Pumpkin?"

"Like in Cinderella."

"Huh?"

Ben decided to clear up the confusion and correct him. "The coach turns into a pumpkin. Are you really a teacher?"

Jason tried something else. "This isn't just any nap. This nap is special. It's for beauty sleep."

"Are you and Daddy gonna take one?" she asked them.

He turned to Ben who only chuckled.

"We might," Jason told her. "How about you?"

"Cinderella Sleeping Beauty sleep, OK," she agreed and pulled the covers up to her chin.

"And I'll be your prince charming and kiss you to wake you up. Like this," Ben said and kissed her on the cheek.

To recreate their bedtime routine, Ben watched an episode of Fillipa Flips with her on his tablet. She snuggled against Ben shoulder then she looked up at Jason, who was lounging in the bedroom doorway.

"You're gonna miss it," she told him. She hit pause until Jason joined them. He sat on the edge of her bed, and she continued to play the cartoon. She got very excited when he pointed at Nathan's name in the credits. Once the cartoon was over and after some tossing and turning, she went to sleep.

"This gives us a little time alone," Ben said as he pulled Jason through the living room and outside onto the balcony.

Jason looked around. The view was gorgeous – the sun beginning to set over snowy fields. With the sun on its way down, the air was growing very cold.

"Time alone to freeze our asses off," Jason said as Ben closed the door behind them.

"Maya won't be napping forever. I have to make sure things don't go too far."

"Freezing my nuts off is one way to make sure of that."

"Come here. I'll warm you up," Ben said and drew him close.

Their lips brushed lightly then made full contact. With their bodies pressed together and their tongues entwining, things were definitely heating up. Ben hooked one leg around Jason's like he wanted to climb him. Jason started grinding into him when Ben stopped to warn him.

"You know, right now, I'm perfectly capable of bending you over that balcony railing."

Jason met his eyes with a feral gaze. "And right now, I'm so close to letting you," he said then let his forehead drop against Ben's shoulder. He let out a complaining moan as Ben's hand rubbed his back in soothing strokes.

"My poor guy, look what I've done to you," Ben mocked him.

"That's no joke," Jason said, raising his head.

That might have been a mistake. He looked into Ben's gorgeous, lustful blue eyes then down at his parted lips. He was just too tempting. Could he risk kissing him again? Oh, what the hell. He went for it but made sure the kiss didn't get too hard or too deep. Save it up for later, he told himself. Fuck, if he saved up any more, he was going to die from unsatisfied lust.

Chapter 14

Ben got ready for the party first so he could help Maya. Leaving Jason to finish getting ready without getting groped, he went to Maya's bedroom. She woke up and looked around at the unfamiliar room in confusion. Then she got out of bed like someone shot her out of a cannon.

"Did I miss it? Did I miss it?" she asked, running around her room.

"No." Ben laughed as he scooped up the hyper little thing and held her in his arms. "You have plenty of time to get ready."

"But it's dark," she said as she peered out the windows.

"It gets dark early. Don't worry about it."

He took her over to the closet to admire her dress. "I'm gonna be pretty for the party," she said, her eyes shining.

"You are pretty already," Ben told her and kissed her on the cheek.

"More pretty, like a princess."

"Yes, you can be my pretty little princess."

Maya's dress was bright pink with a rosette bodice and a poofy skirt. Ben put pins in her hair and then watched her twirl until she got dizzy. The sight of her all dressed up brought tears to his eyes.

Once Maya was dressed, Ben wanted to show her off to her grandparents. He called her over. "Hey, Grandma and Grandpa want to Skype. Come here and show them your fancy dress." She ran over eagerly and Ben left her to preen for his mom and dad.

While she was busy, he and Jason got a moment to admire each other. Jason walked into the living area looking amazing in his black suit.

"This is where I fall in love with you," Ben told him.

"Then you better freeze-frame this moment. This is my one good suit. Everything else I own has to be fit for kids to throw up on," Jason said.

"You're ruining the mystique," Ben told him wanly.

"Sorry." Jason shrugged and slouched a little.

"Damn, you're so sexy," Ben told him and watched him blush. His eyes where bright as he looked at Ben and shook his head. He was so cute when he was embarrassed in a suit, tall and gorgeous. "You are not safe from me right now."

"Stop falling in love with this suit," Jason told him.

"I'm sure you'll look just as good out of it." Ben leered at him openly.

"And you wonder why I always accuse you of being on the prowl."

"I'm an upstanding, mild-mannered, health conscious dad."

"Who is undressing me with his eyes right now," Jason said.

"That's because you look unbelievably gorgeous."

"So do you. You're going to drive me crazy all night long," Jason told him and stepped close with his hands on Ben's waist.

"I can't wait till midnight."

"Why wait?" Jason said, grabbed him and kissed him.

To answer his question, Maya ran into the room.

"Now I remember," Jason said.

That night the snowy garden around the hotel came alive with lights. The lights were all white, but they were expertly strung over trees and bushes. They walked through it in their party clothes hidden under coats, meeting other guests along the way. Many of them also had fancy clothes peeking out from under coats. Maya was delighted and smiled at everyone who passed.

Then it was time to go into the ballroom. Holding both Ben and Jason by the hand, Maya was jumping with excitement. When they stepped through the doors, the party was in full swing.

The garden could be seen through the tall windows. The small orchestra was playing something lively and people were dancing in elegant suits and spectacular dresses. Under their feet was an intricately patterned marble floor.

Maya squealed and looked ready to cry, she was so happy. Ben picked her up and told her, "You're the prettiest one here. Want to dance with me?"

She went crazy on the dance floor while Jason went to say hi to Nathan and Lionel. He joined them a little later. Maya pounced on him immediately and made him dance with her.

Ben wasn't sure there would be any other kids there, but Maya spotted a little boy and girl. She made friends with them in record time and they all danced together. That left Ben to dance with Jason.

"Finally," he said as he found himself in Jason's arms. "I can't believe I'm here with the best looking guy in the room."

"I don't think you've looked around properly," Jason grumbled.

"Waste of time. I refuse to look away from you," Ben claimed then immediately looked to see what Maya was up to. "That doesn't count."

Jason only smiled at him. Ben was so happy. He couldn't believe that a month ago he didn't even know this man. Now they were spending the perfect New Year's Eve together. Or it would be perfect as soon as they were alone.

As he and Jason slow danced, Ben kept an eye on Maya and her antics. The kids seemed to be navigating the crowd without incident. He had already told Maya to stay in sight of him at all times. Now and then she searched for him and Jason, and they waved to her.

As they danced, Ben let Jason lead because he loved the way he

moved. His claim that he couldn't dance just wasn't true. Maybe he didn't have practice, but he was a natural. From now on he would make sure they danced all the time, until they wore out the carpet at his place.

The swaying rhythmic movements and the closeness of Jason's body added up to a dangerous combination. Needing a break so he wouldn't tear Jason's clothes off right there, Ben stepped back. As he took in the sight of Jason, Ben drew in a deep breath and let out a sigh.

"Let's have some champagne before Maya comes back to spill it on us," Ben said.

The two of them sipped very good champagne and watched Maya lead those other kids to meet Nathan Lee. They could see the kids get excited when they found out who he was. The little boy put out his hand for a handshake, and shook Nathan's hand hard. Not wanting to be outdone, the girls did too. They didn't bother Nathan and Lionel for too long though.

Ben decided it was time for Maya to have something from the buffet table. He could just imagine all the fatty, sugary selections there were to choose from. The food was exquisite, but he didn't trust any of it to be healthy. He managed to get Maya fed, but he had more trouble finding anything acceptable for himself. Even the vegetable dishes looked suspiciously luscious. With Jason in his life, he was more determined than ever to stay fit and trim. His boyfriend deserved only the best.

"I think the only thing I would consider eating here are the garnishes," he grumbled to Jason.

In response, Jason gave him a withering look. "Unbend. This is amazing food, and it's a special occasion."

"This kind of thing is why I've been single all this time, isn't it?"

"It might explain it. Good thing I wasn't given a choice."

Ben elbowed him and Jason laughed.

"I'm doing this to look good for you and for my own well-being too."

Jason looked at him appraisingly. "I like what I see, but I'd still like you even if you put on a hundred pounds. You would make a gorgeous looking bear."

"I think I'll stick with my healthy eating obsession," Ben told him.

They ate a little, drank some more then went back to dancing. In Jason's arms, midnight arrived fast. Seeing that the new year was about to arrive, Ben and Jason held Maya between them for one last dance.

Then dancing stopped and the guests started to chant the countdown at the top of their lungs. As midnight struck, a chorus of cheering went up. Corks flew through the air, followed by the gushing of champagne.

They were surrounded by laughter, hugging and kissing. A euphoric feeling filled the ballroom as silver balloons dropped all around them. Maya tried to catch every one. Jason took Ben in a tight embrace throwing his arms around both him and Maya.

"You have to kiss now," Maya told them. They could barely hear her, but they got the message. Seeing their lips join, Maya giggled.

"I'll give you a better one later," Jason whispered in Ben's ear.

As the fireworks announced themselves with a bang, the guests rushed to the windows. Ben still held Maya in his arms so she could see over everyone's heads. She squirmed with excitement. The fireworks arced above the treetops. The night lit up with their colors. The first set of fireworks fanned out in blue then turned purple. They were followed by bright yellow starbursts. Maya clapped and wanted to jump out of Ben's arms, but he held on tight.

As Maya squealed and clapped, fireworks shone in her eyes. Jason's arm was around Ben's shoulder and the solid length of his body pressed against his side. A whole new year was ahead, and Ben knew that their future was starting now.

Chapter 15

Because of Maya, they couldn't stay at the party too long after midnight. As soon as they got to her room, she went to the window and looked up at the sky, but the fireworks were gone.

"No more?" she said mournfully.

"That's because it's time for you to go to sleep," Ben told her.

He could see her eyelids drooping as her breath fogged up the window. Ben drew a smiley face in it and felt the chill of the winter night right through the glass. Frost was making patterns around the edge of the window and snowflakes were starting to come down. Even as she fought back sleep, Maya tried to follow each one with her eyes.

Soon Ben had her tucked in under the covers. He sat on the edge of her bed, and Jason sat in a chair by the window.

"Jason gave us a great New Year's, didn't he?" Ben said as he smoothed her hair.

She nodded and beamed at Jason.

"I owed you one," Jason said to her. "Giving me to your dad was a good move. You did me a solid."

Maya looked confused.

"Thank you for giving me to your dad," Jason said.

"I agree. You did a great thing when you gave me Jason as a Christmas present. Thank you, sweetie," Ben said and kissed the top of her head.

Maya was overjoyed to hear that, but very quickly, she was sound asleep. Ben could see a smile lingering on her lips.

"I love seeing her so happy," Jason said once they were on the other side of her door.

"You made that happen," Ben told him. "You really are the best gift I could ever hope for. You gave us this night and it's wonderful."

"I wish I could give you guys everything, the whole world," Jason said earnestly.

"All we want is you. And your dog."

They went out on the balcony while they waited for Maya to be a hundred percent asleep. Snow was falling in slow motion. The snowflakes seemed lighter than air. Maybe they would never land.

Jason turned up his face to the dark sky. Ben watched as a snowflake landed on his nose then another one on his lips. They melted fast, disappearing, consumed by the burning heat he was putting out.

"I think you could heat a whole building," Ben told him.

Jason turned to him with a questioning look. "Huh?"

"I'm saying you're hot," Ben said as he plastered himself against him.

"You made me sound like some kind of energy efficient fuel."

"You try to deflect every single compliment, don't you?" Ben scolded him. "You're a great guy. The best part is you're here in my arms."

"I'm all yours," Jason mumbled.

"I didn't quite hear that," Ben teased him.

"I guess I'll have to repeat it. I'm yours so don't you ever let me go." Jason's eyes were dark and glinting in the night. Ben could look into them forever.

He reached up and touched Jason's face though he knew his hand must be cold. Jason's eyes were unwavering but pained. Ben understood why. It hurt to want someone so much, to know that nothing but their whole being would satisfy you. Ben had never felt anything like it. His chest felt painfully tight until he started breathing again.

"Look what you do to me," Jason pouted.

"I'm right here with you, and I want you so much it's tearing me apart."

"That's how much I want you," Jason said. For a moment he looked so vulnerable.

Ben grabbed him and kissed him. "I want to make you feel so good," he said and went right back to devouring Jason.

They didn't stop kissing as they dragged each other inside. While trying to stay quiet, they pulled at each other's clothes. Too eager and clumsy, they couldn't get anything done until they stumbled into Jason's room.

Ben pushed Jason away so he could undress him. He barely got his suit jacket off before Jason was on him again. He gripped Ben by the back of the neck and kissed him deeper than he ever had before.

"You made me wait too long," he growled when Ben forced him to let go.

"Hold still. I'm stripping you and you're going to behave," Ben told him sternly.

Ben didn't leave him to suffer for long. He unbuttoned and unzipped him with quick fingers and had him naked and panting in minutes. Jason's long limbed strength was a vision.

Only one dim lamp was on in his room. In the shadowy light, his skin gleamed, tight over each muscle. Ben was in awe of him. As he caressed his chest, he couldn't take his eyes off Jason's hard cock. He kept his hands off it though, teasing him and himself. But he knew that if he touched his cock, he would have to swallow it down.

Circling him, Ben ran his hands over Jason's broad shoulders. He eyed the curve of his ass and grunted. While he kissed the back of his neck, he whispered. "I can't believe this is the first time I'm seeing you naked. Don't even ask me to hold back."

Jason did him one better. He turned to face Ben and told him, "Don't hold back. Now let me get you naked."

It felt so good to have Jason undressing him. He did it slower. His long fingers eased each button through the buttonhole. After one burning look into Ben's eyes, Jason buried his face in the crook of his neck. His kiss drew a moan from Ben. Jason's mouth started there then moved down, following the work of his nimble fingers.

*

Jason took a deep breath as he took in the sight of Ben naked. The hardness of his body, his cock at the ready, the look in his fiery blue eyes – it was too much. Jason's hands shook as he slid them down Ben's strong arms then up to his pecs. His firm flesh was giving under the pressure of his fingers. Jason didn't know how he could get any harder, but he did.

Ben's arm went around his waist locking Jason against him. Cock to cock, they kissed with wild desperation. Their tongues glided over each other until both he and Ben were breathless and beyond aroused.

Out the window, the snowstorm had intensified. Wind howled and drove the snow sideways as they tumbled into the bed, still kissing. Jason broke the kiss so he could lick his way down Ben's body. Reaching his cock he stopped and blew on the glistening head. Ben let out an impatient groan. Jason smiled and let his lips brush his cock head gently. A complaining rumble shook Ben's body like an earthquake. Jason ran his hands up to his chest and lowered his mouth over his cock. He felt another rumble, this one from pleasure.

As his head bobbed over Ben's cock, Jason's hands moved over the length of his body, kneading his rippling muscles. Grunts and moans traveled through Ben to Jason who answered with moans muffled by Ben's cock. The blond hairs on his legs tickled the palms of his hands as he moved them up and down.

Intoxicated by the taste and feel of Ben in his mouth, he was flying high. He barely heard Ben warning him he better stop. With one last lick, Jason pulled off his cock. Ben breathed deeply and eyed Jason as they rearranged themselves on the bed. Ready with condoms and lube, Jason handed them over.

As he lay on his back and pulled his legs up, Jason was consumed by a throbbing need that wouldn't ease up. Ben's lubed fingers only made his need more urgent. He had to have Ben now. A shaky moan escaped him with every thrust of Ben's fingers inside him.

Finally Ben had the back of one of his thighs in a firm grip. He angled his cock and stared down at Jason with a savage, blue eyed intensity he had never seen before.

"Let me have it," Jason demanded.

"Remember to keep it down," Ben warned him as he anchored himself. With a predatory smile, Ben pushed in. That first thrust of his cock was hot, searing relief.

"Yes," Jason gasped. This was what he needed. He took shuddering breaths as Ben's cock sank in deeper. Slow but unrelenting, the pressure split him apart and made him whole, one with Ben. He looked up into his eyes as Ben filled him completely.

"Thank you," he blurted out.

"We're just getting started," Ben growled. He pulled back and thrust in again so hard Jason had to stifle a cry.

"Don't ever stop," Jason begged him.

"When I'm done with you, you'll know just how much I want you," Ben vowed and gave him another powerful thrust.

Jason writhed and moaned. Each time Ben drove his cock in, Jason felt like it reached deeper inside him. He raked his fingers over Ben's back and his ass feeling the muscles flex with every push. Urging him on, Jason cursed and begged. He called Ben's name in a strangled whisper.

He was rising into every thrust even as Ben pounded him with fury. The pleasure inside him felt like it would surge forever. It had no end. Then the force of his own desire was too much for him. Jason couldn't hold back. Intense pleasure exploded through him. His hand pumped furiously. His back arched. Above him, Ben came with gritted teeth and a hushed growl.

Ben's head fell against his shoulder and Jason mussed his hair damp with sweat. Slowly everything stilled. The storm was ending outside. Jason's heart stopped beating wildly. He relearned how to breathe. As he held Ben tight against him, he rubbed the back of his neck. He felt Ben's lips press into his sweat drenched skin slow, soft, and burning. Each kiss left an indelible mark.

"You just gave me everything," Jason murmured into Ben's ear. He sighed in contentment then he heard Ben grumble.

"I have to go back to the sofa," he said but only held on to Jason tighter.

After several long kisses, Ben tore himself away from his embrace. With Ben gone, Jason got up to put on something decent to sleep in. As he pulled on pajama bottoms and a long sleeved t-shirt, he took a look out the window. Snow had stopped falling. The sky had cleared and the moon was shining. The garden below was almost pure white. Moonlight on snow – it was a beautiful night.

He got into bed and wondered how he could ever fall asleep knowing that Ben was right in the next room, warm, sleepy-eyed, and

perfect to wrap his arms around.

Jason wasn't in bed long before he heard a light knock and then his door opened. Ben tiptoed in.

"Sneaking over? Have you no shame?" Jason told him with a self-satisfied smirk. He was sure he would be the one to break down first and sneak over to snuggle up to Ben on the sofa.

"I couldn't sleep," Ben said.

"Get in here," Jason said, pulling back the covers.

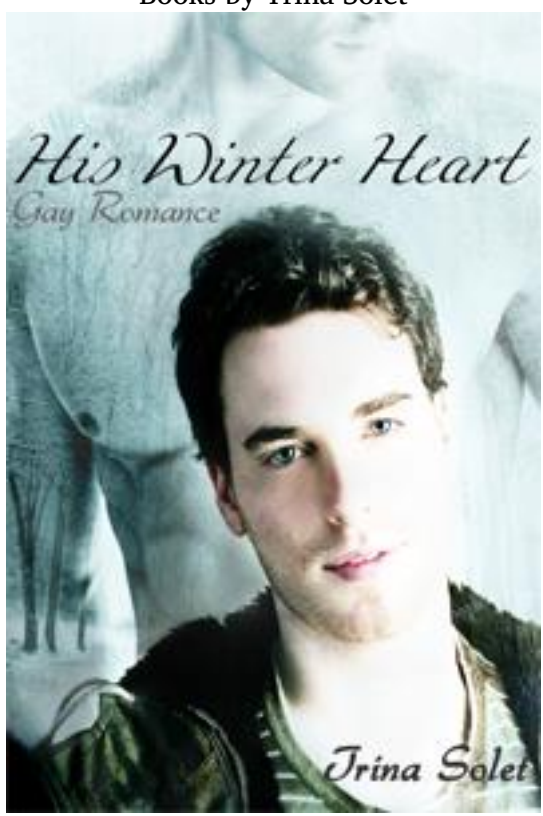
"Ooh, nice and warm," he said as he climbed in bed and settled into Jason's arms. "Damn. You feel too good. I won't have the willpower to leave."

Jason pulled him even closer and heard him sigh.

"I'll just stay a few minutes. Just a little feel of you then I'll go," Ben said, but he showed no signs of moving. After a few minutes Jason heard him snoring softly. Maybe he would wake him before dawn or maybe he would keep him in his bed forever.

The End

Books by Trina Solet



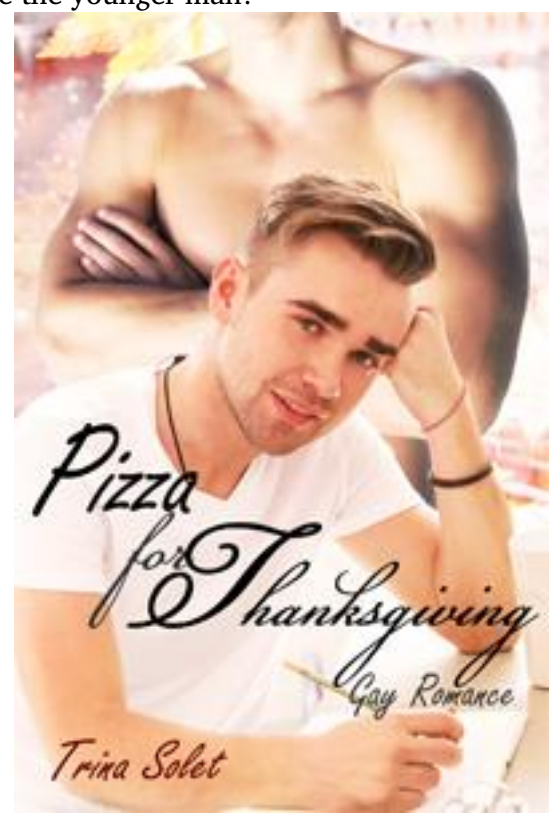
His Winter Heart

Wes is living a lonely, stark existence when he meets Colin, a lively young guy in desperate circumstances. Wes is so taken with him that he has to have him. His decision to invite Colin to spend the night is going to turn his quiet life upside down.

Colin almost finds himself sleeping on the street. When the tall, blond man makes him an offer, he can't say no either to the money or to the man. Colin is impulsive and full of contradictions. He refuses to sell himself for money and ends up homeless because of it. But when Wes offers to pay him for sex, Colin jumps at the chance to go home with him. Something about Wes strikes a chord with Colin. He knows there is a warm heart under the serious, impassive exterior and an awesome body under all the layers of winter clothes.

Things don't go as planned when Wes decides that Colin is too young and inexperienced and refuses to sleep with him. That doesn't mean that he can stay away from someone who shakes up his world.

The more time Colin spends with Wes, the more he wants him. Colin isn't shy about getting what he wants. His relentless pursuit might pay off if Wes doesn't let family complications and his fears about the future keep them apart. Will Wes let go of his inhibitions and allow himself to love the younger man?

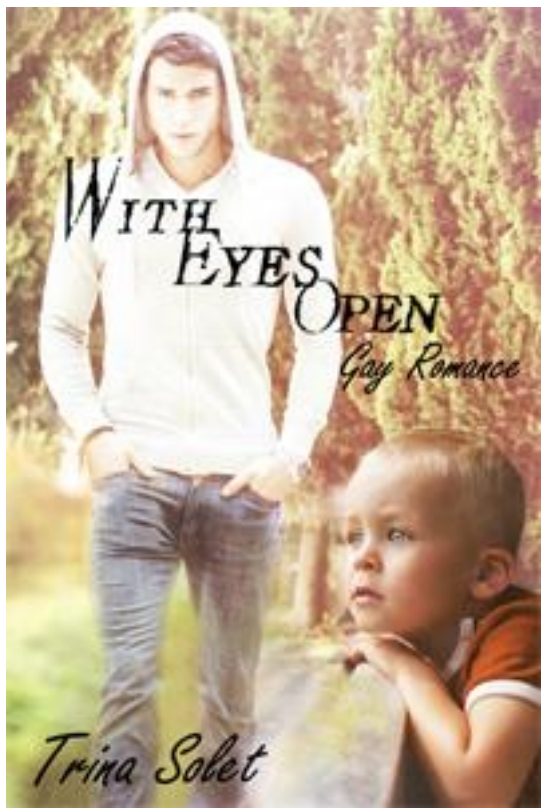


Pizza for Thanksgiving

Mack and Enzo are roommates and nothing more. While sharing the same apartment, they live separate lives. Enzo is sweet but painfully shy. Mack is gruff and kind of intimidating. He's had a hard life and doesn't let his guard down easily.

Now Mack is anticipating a lonely Thanksgiving dinner, but Enzo won't let that happen. When he hears that Mack is going to be all alone for Thanksgiving, he gets up the courage to make him an offer. But things don't go as planned in more ways than one.

With the best of intentions, Enzo has woken up something in Mack that he might not be ready for. Can Mack stop hiding and holding back? When Enzo asks for too much from him, can he say yes anyway?



With Eyes Open

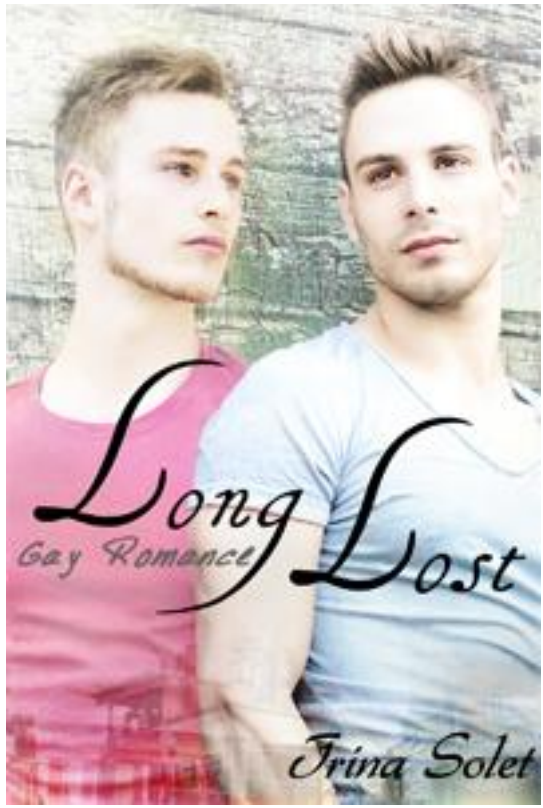
Jacob and his son, Toby, have just moved to a small town. Everything is going well so far, except for one thing – who is Toby talking to in the back garden? There's no one there.

Ian is wondering the same thing. He's taking time off from college to be with his dad. One day he sees the little boy acting strangely, and he decides to look into it.

While Ian is trying to solve the mystery of what Toby is seeing, he and Jacob grow closer. Jacob is a man Ian can trust and lean on at a

difficult time. Jacob has some reservations about Ian, but his feelings are too strong to be denied. Even as unexplained events surround them, these two can't stay away from each other.

Good thing because when Ian finds the answers he's looking for, he's going to need Jacob more than ever.



Long Lost

Blake Adler is back in town on a mission. Years ago Blake's father cut him out of his life so completely that he never spoke of him. Now that his father has passed away, Blake finally gets to meet his younger brother and sister. But Blake didn't come back to Meadowview for a reunion with his lost family. He's desperate to find the man he can't live without and win back the love he threw away.

Blake and Reese were once best friends. They could have been more, but Blake screwed up the most important relationship of his life. Now he wants to fix things with Reese, if he can only find him.

Blake isn't the only one looking for Reese. No matter how far Reese runs, trouble follows him. Wild and vulnerable, he always had it rough. The one good thing in his life was Blake.

Now Reese is taking a big risk coming back to town. It might be worth it if he can reclaim the man he can't stop thinking about, the one who rejected him, the one he loves more than anyone.

Golden Days

How can a nerdy, young dad hope to attract his hunky new neighbor? And if he can get his attention, does he have any hope of making it last?

Kyle only recently became an adoptive father to a vulnerable little girl. He's a devoted dad, and Viv is a spirited and loving five-year-old. With the help of his little dog, Kyle worked hard to gain Viv's love and trust in record time. Now they are a family. That doesn't mean he has no room for a man in his life.

Luke has been working in a string of nightclubs for most of his adult life. It was an exciting life, but Luke had enough of it. A recent loss sends Luke into suburbia in search of a more peaceful life. The loss of his brother is still fresh, but spending time with Kyle and Viv brings him so much joy.

In the past, Kyle hasn't been lucky in love. He always goes for the wrong kind of guy. But with Viv in his life, he can't afford those kinds of mistakes.

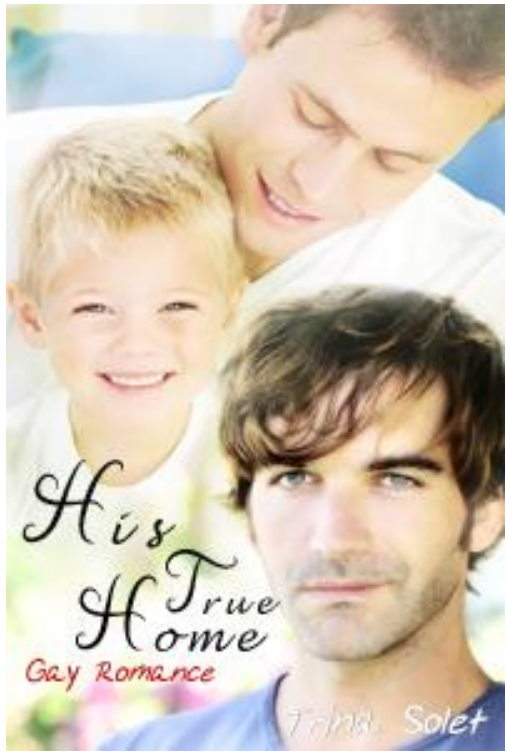
When Luke moves into the neighborhood, Kyle ends up with two wounded souls on his hands. Good thing he has room in his heart for both of them. If Kyle can get past his fears, he might just get everything he has always dreamed of.

Where He Belongs

Jack thought he had everything only to end up without a wife, a best friend or a child. Now he is closed off and afraid to love. After despair nearly cost him his life, he can't afford another heartbreak. Burying himself in work, Jack has made business his whole life. Now a business opportunity has led him to Gus, the one man who can break down his defenses.

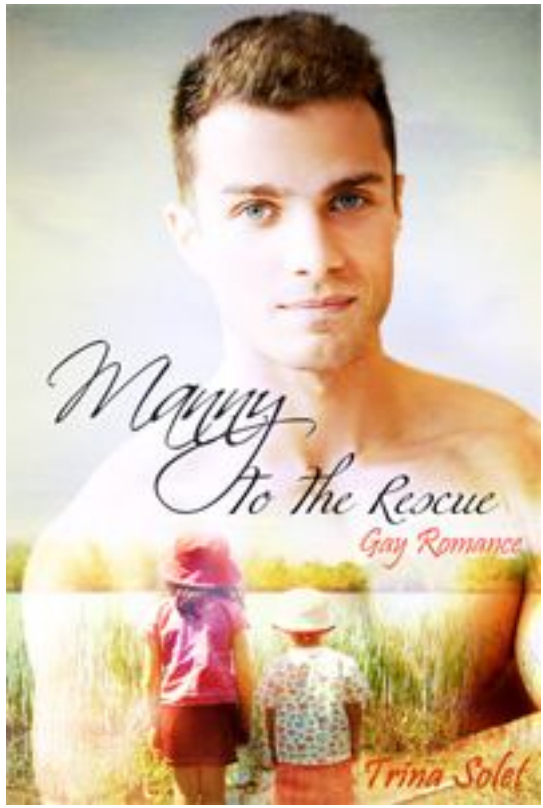
Gus doesn't know what he is getting himself into when he flirts with his new boss. The uptight younger man is irresistible to him. Is Gus being reckless when he falls for Jack despite all the warning signs? After all, Gus is a happy, single father to a little boy, and Josh is a happy kid.

As he is drawn into their lives, Jack finds that Gus and his little boy are everything he needs and what he is most afraid of. Jack can't risk his heart again, but he might be won over by these two goofballs despite himself.



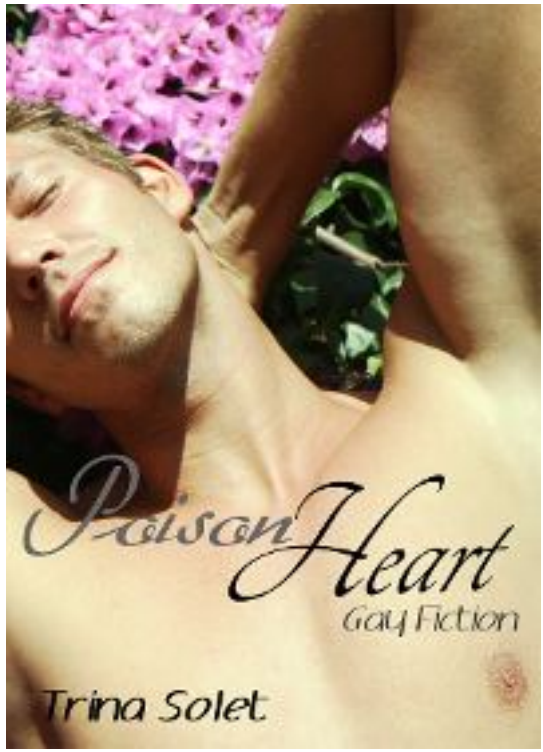
His True Home

Alec has retreated to his childhood home after a life of too much fun. When a little boy is abandoned on the road leading to Alec's home town of Seaview Pines, Alec is the one who ends up taking care of him. Now Cory is on his way to join them. He was abandoned by his mother as well and wants to give Teddy, his little brother, the family he never had. As they spend time together, it's up to Cory to draw out the serious, silent little boy. He also has to convince Alec that his home town isn't just a temporary refuge. It's where all three of them belong.



Manny To The Rescue

Why would Owen be terrified of Connie and Maggie, his two adorable little nieces? Because he is about to be left alone with them. Owen thinks he is going to have to take care of his nieces by himself until Dan shows up. If Owen approves, Dan is ready to be the girls' manny. Right from the start, Dan is a big help and an even bigger temptation. And Owen isn't the only one being tempted. When he was younger, Dan had a crush on Owen. Now that he is living with him, Owen has never looked hotter. The crush is back in full force. Too bad Dan isn't the kind of guy Owen is into. But even a hint that he is interested might spur Dan to make a move. Unfortunately, Dan is bringing trouble with him, and he doesn't even know it. When Owen becomes a target, will Dan be there in time to save him?

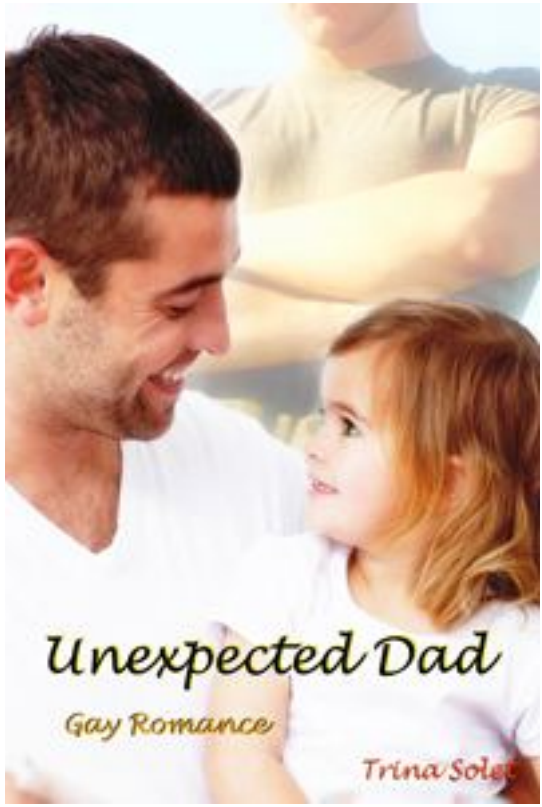


Poison Heart

Is there anything Vince and Cal won't do for each other? The two of them grew up together and fell deeply in love. They were poor but happy until Cal made a big mistake and ended up in jail. He did it for Vince. To get him out, Vince is willing to do anything. Roland Granger has the power and influence to make Cal a free man. All he wants in return is Vince. Even if Cal never forgives him, Vince is willing to sacrifice himself. Now he has to make sure that Cal accepts this unwanted help. And while Vince is trying to set things right in his own life, can he reunite Roland with a self-destructive young man who loves him?

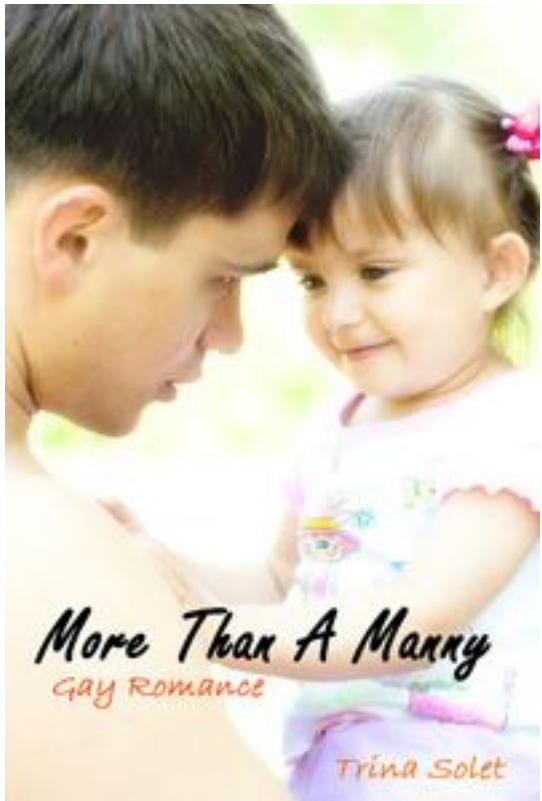
And Manny Makes Three

Mark is a struggling college student who has been working as a nanny for a nice family, but they don't need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?



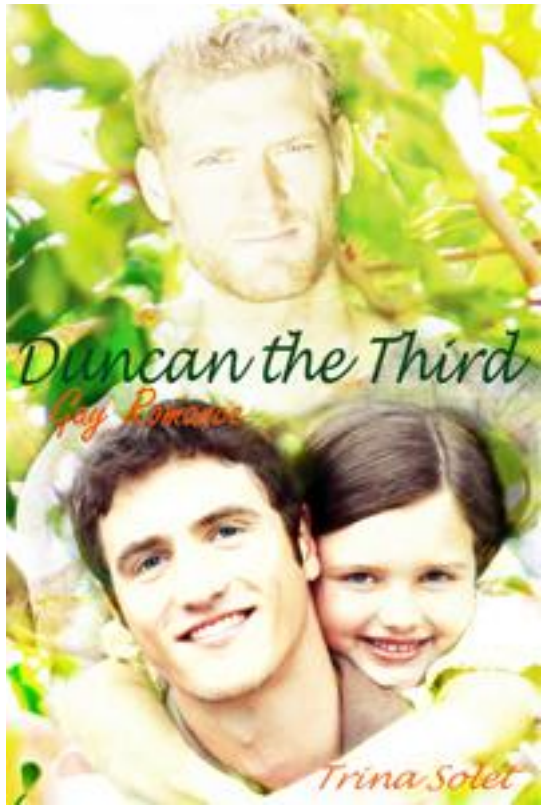
Unexpected Dad

Tyler finds a big surprise waiting on his doorstep. Ready or not, Tyler is a dad. Tyler didn't know he had a daughter until she suddenly dropped into his life. Whether he is ready for her or not, little Julie needs a father. Or maybe two. Tyler and Jake have been best friends, inseparable since college. Now they have to adjust to Tyler's new role as a dad. As Jake helps him cope with being a new father to a little girl, Tyler might be looking at two big changes in his life.



More Than a Manny

A very young, rich widower needs a nanny, but a hot manny would be even better. That's where Nate comes in. Brent is a loving but irresponsible father to two young children from a marriage of convenience. He needs Nate in his life, but how will Nate, a first time nanny, fit into his unconventional household? The kids are a handful, especially little Georgie. Her big brother, Ricky, has a few issues of his own. But Nate is more than ready to take on the challenge and let all three of them steal his heart.

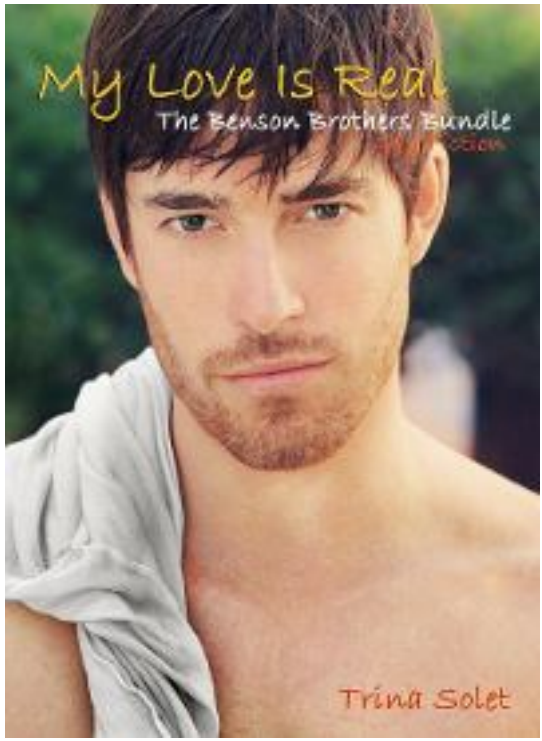


Duncan the Third

Patrick and his little sister, Wendy, have just moved into Duncan's building and that means trouble. Patrick is exactly the kind of guy Duncan can't resist. Together he and his little sister might be the family Duncan has been yearning for but only if he takes a chance and lets them into his heart. Unfortunately, Duncan hasn't been lucky when it comes to relationships. After getting his heart broken too many times, he has sworn off younger men. While Duncan struggles against his attraction to him, Patrick is determined to win him over. As Patrick tries to change his mind, can he also heal Duncan's broken heart?

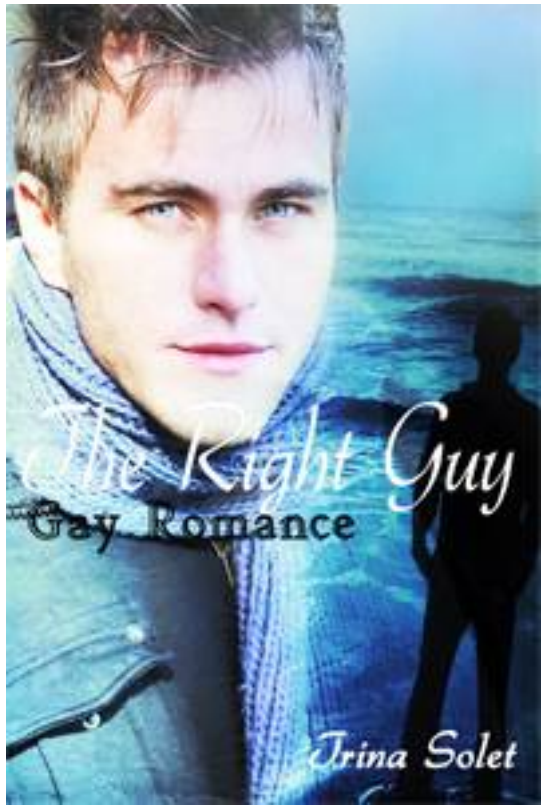
Make It Better

A favor leads to a life changing experience. Ray is willing to do anything for the man he considers his savior. His mission of mercy is Marcus, a young man who can't overcome his guilt over a tragedy in his past. Is Ray making a terrible mistake giving his heart to him, or will his love for Marcus be strong enough to save him?



My Love Is Real: The Benson Brothers Story

For almost a year Sean and Brian thought they were brothers. Sean wants him more than anything, but will Brian ever accept his love? His pride is only one of the obstacles standing in their way. A dangerous man has a claim on Brian.



The Right Guy

They came together in paradise, but what will happen when they go back to the real world and their everyday lives?

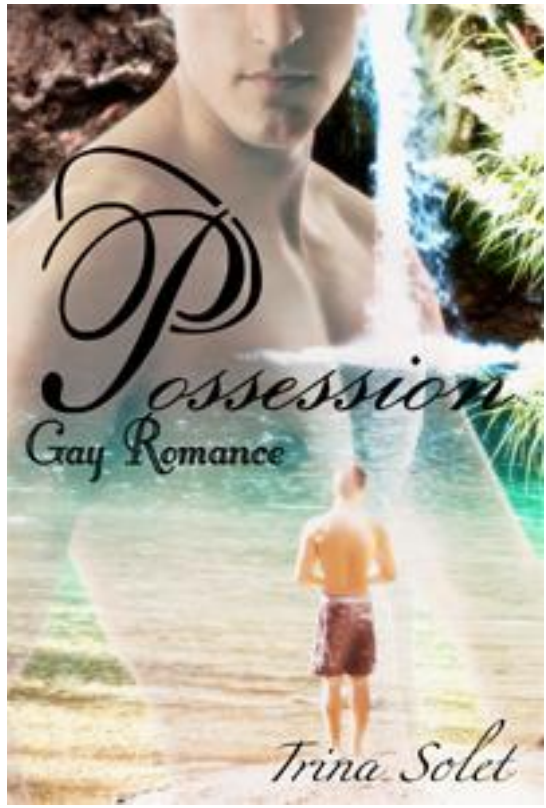
Nathan and Paul never liked each other. Paul was a snob, and Nathan felt like he was always looking down on him. Nathan wasn't interested in him anyway. He had his sights set on Turner. Now that Turner is getting married to another man, Nathan's heart is breaking. That's when he finds that Paul is right there by his side. This gorgeous man is ready to distract him and help him get over his unrequited crush.

After being with Paul, Nathan is finally ready to move on and let go of his hopeless feelings. But after a hot encounter on the beach, Nathan might be giving up his old crush for a new one. Knowing that his longing for Paul is just as hopeless, Nathan is at his wit's end.

But things aren't the way they seem. Paul has been watching Nathan pine after his friend for too long. All that time he has wanted Nathan all to himself. It's hard for Paul to believe that Nathan could ever return his feelings. After all, Nathan doesn't even like him.

He doesn't know that Nathan feels differently about him these days. When spending time with Paul stirs unexpected feelings that are more than lust, Nathan wonders if he misjudged this man. Could Paul be the

right man for him? After chasing the wrong guy for so long, Nathan has to prove to Paul that his feelings are real. That won't be easy. Paul isn't the most reasonable guy, and he won't settle for anything less from Nathan than his whole heart.



Possession

While looking for solitude, James finds love.

As soon as he arrives at the secluded, tropical villa, James knows he has found the ideal spot. Tranquil and remote, this place is just what he needs to get over a painful breakup. In perfect solitude, James's heart can begin to heal. But what if his solitude isn't so perfect, and Rob is. He is the young man who intrudes on James's privacy and steals his heart.

Rob is too much of a temptation for the cautious and uptight James. Even as he gives in to his desire, James reminds himself that this is just a vacation fling. Then why is the thought of leaving Rob tearing him apart? He can't get enough of the younger man. Once James has his body, he can't live without having his heart.

James thinks his yearning is hopeless. Then a revelation about Rob's circumstances changes everything. Will James have the courage to act on his feelings? He has to. This is his chance to have Rob, to give him the life he deserves and to truly love him.